

**Alone in America: Boyhood in Mark Twain and
Sherman Alexie's Fiction.**

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INTRODUCTION

It is a rare miracle when a human being is created from ink, paper and imagination. It is an even rarer miracle when an author is able to recapture the reality of boyhood or adolescence. To create a boy who has reality requires acute and accurate observation, a retentive memory and, especially, skillful artistry. This is the extraordinary alchemy which gives life to those boys whose reality we apprehend with delight and whom we probably know better than many of our “friends and acquaintances”.

In discussing the American youth, I realize I am entering a field already over-populated. Multitudes of experts have studied the boy and adolescent. Since the Tom and Huck of *Tom Sawyer* walked ridge-poles, since Oliver Twist roamed the streets of London and Pip inherited his “Great Expectations” at last and against all odds, since Holden crossed Central Park fearing change, and the Lone Ranger fist-fought in Heaven, such young people have become the centre of many publications, film adaptations and discussions.

Numerous experts have studied the boy and adolescent, have written about his childhood memories, his motivations and the lives they have pursued once adults.

Many writers and scholars have also reflected upon what makes an American boyhood so distinctive and at times opposed to the European tradition.

In the initial part of my work, I will focus on what are the main distinctions between the English Dickensian adolescence experienced by Oliver Twist and Pip and the one described by Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Both authors have created boys well worth knowing and studying from literary and artistic standpoints and from a human one as well. I begin my analysis with Huckleberry Finn, the character who has been hailed and canonized as an icon of the American literature and I will observe how his boyhood is diametrically opposed to the young male heroes of the British Victorian tradition. In fact, with the exception of Sir Walter Scott and Fenimore

Cooper, rarely two British and American writers of the nineteenth century have been as frequently compared as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Even when we compare Huck and Pip, the protagonist of *Great Expectations*, it is possible to identify both boys' outward allegiance to a society whose values they instinctively oppose. Both children act in conflict with the rules of society and family that have been imposed upon them and their instinctive goodness is frequently inhibited or challenged by the deceiving nature of the adults around them. In addition to that, another connection that unifies the two authors is their similar critical vision about the "treatment of the children". Erik Erikson's observations in *Childhood and Society* reflect an important similarity between the two writers. In fact for Dickens and Twain, as for Erikson himself, the relationships between childhood and anxiety and adult destructiveness exist because they serve a wider system of social custom and exploitation".¹

The purpose of this first part of my study is not simply to identify the differences and the similarities amongst the three young heroes, but also to demonstrate how for both authors boyhood is a problematic, at times grotesque, rather than an innocent time of life. It is marked not only by youthful fears but by the absence of an adult world capable of alleviating those fears.²

For Pip and Huck, in particular, home offers neither safety nor freedom. At best it is an emotional hothouse, at worst it is a pastoral prison. In both cases, however, it is an area that generally tends to be controlled by women. In the Gargery household Joe is, as Pip says, a larger species of child. His domestic function is to work, earn a living and leave all the important decisions to the discretion of Mrs Joe. With the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson tension between the feminine and the masculine realms of thought has been eliminated altogether. There are no men in their house. Moreover, those rare exceptions who try to enter their universe are inevitably intruders like Pap Finn.

In stressing the manner in which women dominated domestic life in mid-nineteenth century England and America, Dickens and Twain were not guilty of making fun of what James Thurber has called "the war of sexes". Modern studies such as Walter Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* and William Taylor's *Cavalier and Yankee* have shown that "the

ideal home of the period was one where the woman ruled supreme in matters of taste and judgment and the man devoted himself to material pursuits”.³

Both Dickens and Twain recognized that such a surrender in masculine authority was bound to be strongly inhibiting. Pip and Huck suffer so many restrictions imposed by women, but at the same time they depend upon the kindness of mother figures and families that ultimately are not theirs. For this reason, the boys also experience humiliation even if they are the real victims of neglect. To Mrs Joe, Pip seems to have been born in “opposition to the dictates of reason, religion and morality”. She finds him “naturally vicious”, as her friend Mr Hubble says, and she continuously reminds him of his unworthiness by warning him to be grateful to those who “brought him up by hand”. Similarly, the Widow Douglas is constantly crying over Huck and calling him a “poor lost lamb”, but it is Miss Watson who is the hardest on him. She is the one who draws the connection between Huck’s natural feelings and the likelihood of his going to “the bad place”, and it is her version of Hell that torments the child when he helps Jim escape. Under these circumstances it is quite understandable why Pip and Huck wish to leave home.

In the second chapter I will analyze how the ideal and the intention of leaving home is an ambition that belongs to “little men” and to “little women” alike. To demonstrate such analogy I have cited the novel *Little Women* and analyzed the different gender roles that the characters of Jo and Laurie present. It is quite evident that gender plays an important role in *Little Women*. First of all, it is worth mentioning that, due to strong Protestant influences, nineteenth century American life stressed the importance of hard work, social propriety, and religious piety. With these social norms came rigid views of gender roles. Women especially were limited as to what their status was in this society (Clark, 2004).⁴ Jo, just as the author herself, nurtured a Romanticized vision of boyhood as opposed to girlhood that only seemed to be condemned to a domestic and static way of living. However, by studying Laurie’s circumstances, it is possible to unveil how a masculine adolescence that Jo dreams of can also be limited and allotted in a narrow and patriarchal culture. In fact, if the book becomes almost instructional on how young ladies should act in order to gain respect, to find husbands, and then experience happiness, it also reveals how the same expectations on how to become educated, find work and gain wealth are reserved for boys as well. At a

very young age, Jo dislikes the constraints put on her by being a female and complains “I can’t get over my disappointment at not being a boy...I can only stay at home and knit like a pokey old woman” (Clark, 2004).

Instead of relying on a man for her future as an adult, Jo desperately wants to be independent from the tangles of a domestic and married life. As much as she envies the “Capital time” that boys seem to have, we observe that Laurie is far from being free and independent from his guardians’ expectations on him and, just like the free spirited March girl, he dreams of an escape from his domesticity and from his future as a gentleman.

The always present fantasy of leaving home is a classic topic in many American boyhoods. A case in point is Melville’s semi-autobiographical fourth novel, *Redburn*. Published during a moment in which calls proliferated for individual Americans and the nation at large to come-of-age, Melville’s book exposes maturation as deeply ideological and tied to capitalist and nationalist values.

Initially, *Redburn* seems to be a conventional coming-of-age novel, centered in a classic story of male “voyage”. It tells the story of the naïve Wellingborough Redburn’s journey aboard the Highlander, a merchant ship bound for Liverpool. Its opening chapters and subtitle, “His First Voyage Being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-Of-A Gentleman in the Merchant Navy”, signal an interest in rites of passage and initiation. Like his literary descendant Ishmael, the young hero is avid for life experience, having gleaned a romantic view of the sailor’s life from novels and family stories, but from the moment he boards the Highlander, his preconceptions about the sailor’s life - and about life in general - are repeatedly shattered. “Was this the beginning of my sea-career? Set to cleaning out a pigpen, the very first thing?” Redburn wonders.

The boy’s disillusionment with the sailor’s life and the knowledge he gleans about society would seem to be the necessary elements of his maturation. Indeed, coming-of-age novels are all in some sense about coming to understand the harsh realities of the adult world. But what differentiates the novel is also that it exposes maturity as a construction that corresponds with capitalism, nationalism, and other ideological systems. In *Redburn*, adolescence is synonymous with coming to accept the demands of capitalism, the brutality of masculinity, and the corruption of authority figures. The novel, just like *Little Women*

with Laurie, takes the shape of a critique of masculinity. Laurie represents in fact a sort of a “Death of Boyhood” as he does not succeed in his ambition of leaving home, but he remains imprisoned by the many social expectations and roles pre-arranged for him by his guardians. Redburn, on the contrary, in spite of having temporarily set free from his status of gentleman, becomes mocked and humiliated on the ship. He is re-christened “Buttons”, which proves that his journey becomes infantilizing rather than ennobling for him. From the moment he leaves home, the novel explores a disjunction between inherited ideas about sailors’ lives and new, less romantic realities. Ultimately, the protagonist experiences disappointment during his first encounter with England “If *that’s* the why a foreign country looks, I might as well have staid (sic) at home”.⁵

However, England also becomes the place where he begins to break the rules of his middle-class culture and of his family: “What would my brother have said?” he wonders as he strays from the conventional path (R,265). Redburn’s mysterious night in London cements his break from his family and from the capitalist logic of the Highlander.

Inevitably, the idea of breaking the rules and to embrace disobedience is one of the central aspects of my research.

In Chapter 3, therefore, I will analyze how the concepts of freedom and disobedience go hand in hand in describing an American boyhood. Huckleberry Finn is certainly the best representative. The novel has come to be judged a major and inescapably central American classic, of a kind of *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Leaves of Grass* and- closer to his own later nineteenth century- the fiction of Henry James.

Huck promotes completely opposite values compared to the young genteel English young heroes. Unlike his English counterparts such as Pip and Oliver Twist, he is a runaway, he is uneducated and rejects the authority and the guidance of the adults around him. On the other hand, Oliver, in spite of being an orphan, a poor victim of those austere times that often mistreated children, longs for a role in his society and dreams of becoming a gentleman. There are many distinctions between these two heroes. For example, Oliver speaks an accurate and grammatically perfect English, while Huck speaks the Southern dialect and refuses categorically any form of education. Moreover, their relationship with women is poles apart. Oliver sees in women that maternal comfort that he has never

experienced as a child, while Huck sees in them the oppressors and the limits of domestic life.

Huck proposes a diametrically opposite goal from Oliver and Pip. “In a new society of shifting social classes”, Hana Wirth Nesher has stated, “the roving orphan, or picaro, could create a past that suited his aspirations rather than his blood ties, and Dickens and Twain are both drawing on this literary heritage of either voluntary or involuntary disinheritance”. Pip seeks social enfranchisement, whereas his American counterpart Huck -in deference to Twain’s penchant for adventure over social grace - strives to escape the constraints of societal obligation. Such divergent goals may be reflective of cultural aspirations of their respective national identities. Wirth-Nesher has suggested that while “Orphanhood in American literature is a clean slate, self-reliance, and often enchanted solitude that veers dangerously close to real loneliness”, orphanhood in the English narrative is less idyllic, featuring child protagonists who are instead “on a quest to find a place for themselves in society rather than arranging for a romantic exit”.⁶

By leaving home and “sivilization” behind, Huck breaks the tradition confronting the world’s challenges with no boundaries, no authority and all alone. This freedom, however, also creates a loss of safety. The security of home and family no longer exists. Although the initial loneliness of the hero may be an element of appeal, later on we realize that the archetypal orphan’s final objective is generally to return home without harm. Our society does not value the perpetual state of orphanhood. It does value individualism; however, even individualism has a place to call home. Even for Pip and Oliver Twist the objective is to find security for fear of being exploited.

Similarly, the young male heroes portrayed in Sherman Alexie’s most recent novels *Flight* and *The Absolute True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, also aspire to a domestic safety and to a more advantaged life outside the limiting space of the Reservation, but at the same time they aim at a future in the white dominant society that had once excluded them from the American context. Alexie’s boys and Juniors do in fact combine the aspects of the runaway American rebel and, just like Huck, they refuse and object the codes and the legacy of the Indian Rez.

Such differences highlight how a troublesome, a rebel and a fugitive became the symbol and the spirit of the new American nation. Similarly, since studying the novels and writings of Sherman Alexie, I have found myself in the presence of the same dynamics that affected and troubled Huck so much. Likewise, the Indian boys escape from broken homes and abuse, but in the end either attempt or manage to return to a much more hopeful dimension. For example, the protagonist of *Flight*, Zits, like his literary ancestor, Billy Pilgrim of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, finds himself "unstuck in time"- entering and exiting the bodies of young and old throughout the whole narration. However, in the end, he returns to the warmth of a loving foster family and becomes reacquired by the mainstream society.

In the same way, another "Junior", the young man of *The Absolute True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, becomes a reservation runaway trying to find his feet and better opportunities in a wealthy and private white school.

Both novels reflect the double dimension of the city and the reservation. As Alexie explains in an interview "Up until now, I've always written identifiably Indian stories. I felt so conflicted about having fled the rez as a kid that I created a whole literary career that left me there".

The lesson of both the young-adult books is "Get off the rez. Be nomadic". Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are dedicated to the analysis of the two novels and of the two protagonists who embrace their departure from the oppressive home context in an innovative, diverse and at times pessimistic fashion. With all the ugly and beautiful stories of city and reservation life, Alexie depicts in his heroes a powerful blend of rebellion, loneliness, love, rage and hope. These boys, as I explain in Chapter 7, have experienced neglect, abuse and squalor and lack of dignified father figures. The absence of a powerful role model is a common denominator in Oliver, Pip, Huck, Arnold and Zits and often such youngsters find alternative paternal figures in guardians, friends or benefactors. The boys construct and reinvent another version of home according to their own values, likes and dislikes.

Alexie makes them mobile and more ambitious than their fathers. They wish of becoming Super-heroes, writers and basketball players. And, unlike Huck, they aim at a formal education which hopefully will open new avenues for them. I argue if the Indian

heroes of Sherman Alexie can be considered nowadays as equally representative and “quintessentially” American as Huck has been for centuries.

The Native Americans were once the “legitimate dwellers” of the North American continent, but history reminds us that after the arrival of the European settlers they progressively lost their rights and became condemned to move, to be killed and, later on, to become enclosed in small reservation contexts.

In my research I will collocate Alexie’s boys in a wider background which also involves comparing and contrasting them to their more classic and wellknown American counterparts.

Sherman Alexie novels have been the ideal source to begin my investigation as the author gives his Indian heroes an innovative, culturally modern and positive voice.

Alexie maintains a well balanced perspective in his writings. On one hand, he acknowledges the past, the abuse and the oppression that the Natives have been forced to witness but, on the other, he does not let his heroes indulge in an eternal state of victimization and self-destructive ideas. He treats and represents his boys as funny caricatures with big dreams and glorious visions which often travel from the past, present and into the future. They are creative and melancholic people who long for a place and a dignified role in the American society.

Just like Huck, they have seen a lot of violence in their life, mainly on behalf of the adults who are mostly categorized as negative figures. Yet, thanks to their “magic powers” that only Indians can rely on, that unsolvable (or maybe not?) equation that determines reality of $\text{Survival} = \text{Anger} \times \text{Imagination}$, these young men will slowly progress into adulthood and give this new stage new rules and connotations.

Twain and Alexie treat boys as people, not as statistics. They look thoughtfully, humorously, and imaginatively at the human condition. Very much aware that boyhood is a private experience, they are conceived so intensely as to make their voices the voice of a national experience.

In spite of the difference in the authors’ treatment of the hero, each one of them knows that the inner life of a boy, his motives, attitudes, rebellions, and behavior have much in common.

So I shall consider what these writers believe is universal in all of boyhood, whether one is floating down the Mississippi, fist-fighting on the reservation or dreaming of becoming a basketball superstar.

Because humor is such an important element in the creation of those boys and because it underlines their universality, it will receive a special attention in my thesis.

I will discuss the particular view of human experience in each book, including the way in which the setting and dialogue capture the several attitudes towards boyhood, whether the author fuses these elements to make a serious comment on the human condition or merely presents a facet of youth in each historical background.

The theme of Boyhood was not “universal known” in the United States during the nineteenth century, and it generated far less agreement that we might believe. In fact, the discipline of boys was given the same scrutiny that characterized the management of girls, and diverse forms of pedagogy were certainly ever present in the novels for boys and other writings about them. Thus, the idea of nineteenth century boys as always “free to rebel” or unencumbered by the discipline that informed girls’ future and lives is a narrative form that has become memorable thanks to certain novels. In particular, *Tom Sawyer*, endorsed by successive generations of writers and repeated by twentieth and twentieth-first century critics, have concentrated largely on the Post-Bellum period.

As we note with regret that growing-up seems to have become more of a public nuisance than a private experience. The male heroes chosen resist that change represented by growth and adulthood by escaping and by abandoning physically or psychologically that world that is coming at them with rules and criteria that adolescents cannot accept or embrace.

Their personal freedom becomes unique in each story and for each boy; for Oliver and Pip, liberty becomes a synonym of gentility and wealth. By finding security in being a gentleman and inheriting a fortune they can no longer be slaved nor exploited. Zits and Arnold run away from the Rez to find freedom in a wider urban contexts. They swap a geographical location for another, only with better opportunities and a more diversified society. As for Huck, he will always remain the one who chooses freedom as a state of being, and proceeds defiant and without a plan on his fragile and perilous raft.

Notes Introduction

¹ Erikson Erik, *Childhood and Society*, (New York, 1950) pp.237-44, 371-2.

² Spilka Mark, *Dickens and Kafka* (London, 1963), pp 13-15.

³ Houghton Walter, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven 1963), pp.331-5;

⁴ Clark, Beverly Lyon. *The Afterlife of Little Women*. Baltimore. John Hopkins University Press, 2004, pp. 271.

⁵ *Redburn*

⁶ Wirth-Nesher, Hana. *The Literary Orphan as National Hero: Huck and Pip*. Dickens Studies Annual 15 (1986):259-73.

CHAPTER I

PICAROEES, REBELS AND THOSE WHO ASKED FOR MORE...

It may be somewhere, in a far Reservation school in Washington State, in the bleak slums of the Victorian East End or on a fugitive and perilous raft traveling by the mighty Mississippi that we encounter the many facets of boyhood. Certainly this is a grand recurring theme in World Literature and yet a topic of inexhaustible charm and richness, a pillar subject in American fiction.

The aim of my research is to compare some very diverse experiences of adolescence focusing on Mark Twain and Charles Dickens' young heroes. I begin my analysis reflecting on the different aspects that distinguish the American boyhood from an English and European one. Although it may seem that the boys in question are poles apart, my study begins with a comparative analysis of three illustrious representatives of boyhood: Oliver Twist, Pip and Huckleberry Finn.

I will start my study from the grand European tradition of a quintessentially English writer, Charles Dickens, who has been the poet of the modern metropolis and the inventor of a new *Bildungsroman*, and juxtapose his work to the American experience depicted by Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The aim of this primary analysis is to create a starting point that will differentiate and highlight the canons, the characters and the main features of a young and gentle English hero as opposed to his wilder American counterpart. One of the main purposes of my thesis is to find concordances and differences in child heroes represented by English and American novelists, and compare these two in literal perspectives.

Both Charles Dickens and Mark Twain have told their stories to children as well adults in many different languages and their novels give a detailed depiction of life in the nineteenth century. The conditions of literature during such years were extremely changeable. The significant period of the Enlightenment and Classicism of the eighteenth century was replaced by Pre-Romanticism and then by Romanticism. Victoria became Queen in 1837

and the whole period is named after her Majesty – the Victorian Period, which is characterized by Realism in literature, especially Critical Realism. The most popular genre was the social novel. There were more types of novels, but *Oliver Twist* is rather difficult to classify because there are more genres embedded in it. Claire Wood in her article “Oliver Twist: a patchwork of genres”¹ classified *Oliver Twist* as an experimental novel. Dickens used various techniques such as satire, in those parts which deal with social problems (life in a workhouse, members of the board, the judiciary), while sentimentality prevails in the depiction of the poor and treatment of those people. Another distinctive point is the use of elements which belong to the Gothic tradition in meaning that there are many foreshadowing of chosen characters – Nancy foresees her death, Sikes after murdering of Nancy is chased by the vision of her eyes, Oliver sees Fagin and Monks plotting his kidnapping. In chapter 17 Dickens admits that his novel is a melodrama: “It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodrama, to present the tragic and the comic scenes in as regular alternation as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; and, in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song” (Dickens 2000a :106).

Of all the figures in English literature, Charles Dickens is probably the most famous for his children- *Oliver Twist*, *Little Nell*, *David Copperfield* and *Pip* in *Great Expectations*. He extended the romantics’ moral, psychological, and philosophical use of the child from the realm of lyric and personal epic poetry into that of the encyclopedic Victorian novel. In this sense a child’s welfare now also became the crucial index of a nation’s- indeed, an empire’s social and political health, and its survival. Throughout the legendary sprawl of his fifteen novels, Dickens repeatedly explored the theme expressed most memorably in Wordsworth’s phrase that “The child is the Father of the Man”. This is essentially an optimistic truth in *Oliver Twist*. Oliver’s unchanging innocence and grace make him an agent of redemption in the surrounding world that is falling apart. But in *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* we notice that a damaged child produces a damaged man. Childhood fantasy is a resource that can comfort one’s life and serve as a source of literary inspiration, but childhood loss and abuse can also cripple one’s development and personal

life for good. As we may observe, both novels narrate the struggle and the growth of two sensitive and capable young men. In Dickensian works the unwanted, marginal boys discover a new gentility and social status generally thanks to the intervention of a benefactor or a guardian who will help change the course of their stars forever, while in the American novels boys seek independence, not rarely in solitude or by distancing themselves from the rest of society. According to Hana Wirth-Nesher “Pip in *Great Expectations* seeks social enfranchisement, whereas his American counterpart Huck - in deference to Twain’s penchant for adventure over social grace- strives to escape the constraints of societal obligation”.

Such divergent goals can be also seen as different cultural aspirations of their respective national identities. “Orphanhood in American literature is a clean slate, self-reliance and often enchanted solitude that veers dangerously close to real loneliness”, while in the English narrative is less idyllic, featuring child protagonists who are instead “on a quest to find a place for themselves in a society rather than arranging a romantic exit”.²

Mark Twain’s notes indicate that he meant for Huck to be about fourteen years old, very near to the age at which boys enter manhood in most societies. He is pubescent. He is trapped in an intermediate state between the innocence boyhood involves and the harshness of adult life. The events of the book take place during this extremely confusing transition in his life. As he travels down the Mississippi, he is in the process of becoming a man. Ms Durst Johnson furthers this connection between Huck and the river;

“This transitional period in Huck’ s life, between boyhood and adulthood, is symbolized by his move down the river. Like the river, Huck is always in flux, constantly changing, at times peaceful, at times turbulent, sometimes clear, and sometimes foggy”.³

Interestingly enough, there is a parallelism between the Thames and the Mississippi. The literary purpose of both rivers is revealed in separate descriptions of them by Dorothy Van Ghent and T.S. Eliot. As Miss Van Ghent observes in her critical study, *The English Novel: Form and Function*: “The river is perhaps the most constant and effective symbol in Dickens, because it establishes itself so readily in the imagination as a daemonic element, drowning people as if by intent, disgorging unforeseen evidence, chemically or physically, changing all it touches...but it is (also) the common passage and actual flowing element that

unites individuals and classes, public persons and private persons, deeds and the results of deeds, however fragmentized and sepatated".⁴

As T.S. Eliot writes in his introduction to the Cresset edition of *Huckleberry Finn*:

"The River gives the book, its form...it runs with a speed such that no man or beast can survive in it. At such times, it carries down human bodies, cattle and houses.

It is the River that controls the voyage of Huck and Jim ...It is the River that separates them and deposits Huck for a time in the Grangerford household; that reunites them, and then compels upon them the unwelcome company of the King and the Duke. Recurrently we are reminded of its presence and its power." ⁵

On the other side, this natural element in *Great Expectations* and *Huckleberry Finn* can also be seen as a betrayer. At the moment when it should lead to freedom, it leads to the capture of Magwitch and Jim. However, the river can be ultimately seen as a symbol of liberty and rebirth for Huck and a place of adventure for the Dickensian heroes.

There is also a diametrically opposed sense of maturity and morality in the two boys. For example, there is a moment in the story where Pip expresses regret for his previous actions and implies that he will feel remorse. After an early visit to Miss Havisham's house, the mature Pip describes how "some counfounding remembrance of the Havisham days would fall upon (him), like a destructive missile, and scatter (his) wits again". Furthermore, the mature Pip shows remorse and feels that "he has deserted Joe" when the convict visits him, and thus believes himself guilty of crimes similar to those of the convict.

Huck, on the contrary, does not describe his previous actions in light of a new maturity in *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck's mistakes remain in the present tense and we never see him as an adult thinking about his past and of the errors he has made.

The differences among Pip, Oliver and Huck tend to become more evident as we approach the conclusion of the three novels. In fact, the tales of the two orphans offer readers a choice of reality and responsibility or other adventures. For the Englishman Pip, the end of the quest is an acceptance of respectable reality. Like the prodigal, he returns home first to Joe, then to a humble and fitting job, and finally to a possible future with Estella, his one true love.

American Huck, on the other hand, resists such a return “I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t it. I been there before”.

If the English heroes tend to look up to “sivilisation”, the American protagonist simply turns his back at it by remaining in the life he has chosen. All of these youngsters though embrace adventure and face the hardships of their own time page after page and year after year.

The full title of *Oliver Twist* is *The Adventures of Oliver Twist of The Parish Boy’s Progress*. “Adventures” immediately identifies it with the picaresque tradition of Fielding, Defoe and Smollett. “Parish Boy” quickly places the main character in a social, economic, political context that the novel will certainly criticize and eventually condemn. The “Progress” in question both reminds us and alludes to John Bunyan’s moral allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678-84) and therefore identifies little Oliver with his allegorical hero and with *Rake’s Progress* by the painter William Hogarth, whom Dickens described in the 1841 preface to *Oliver Twist* as “the moralist and censor oh his age”,

The book title, then, conveys that the novel will be picaresque, political, religious, allegorical, and intensely visual and will encompass even what the author calls “the very sum and refuse of the land”. As he declares in the Preface, “I wished to show, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphant at last”. The child is used to show a triumphant “principle”.

In the powerful and unforgettable setting of London presented as a symbol of the modern metropolis par excellence, with its diversified segments of the human kind, its opportunities and its perils, Dickens invites us to be part of that fictional universe made of servants, working children, sweepers, noblemen, thieves, nurses and prisoners. He borrows some elements of the human sphere from his own boyhood spent in the workhouses and from his life marked by sojourns in other nations and his experience in journalism. Charles Dickens belonged to that clique of writers who supported the concept of the Original Innocence, the basis of the Romantic Child, which meant that children were born without any sins and only by being exposed to the corrupt society, they lost natural purity. There seems to be only Oliver, his friend Dick and perhaps Rose who represent this idea, who, withstanding

the hostile circumstances, preserve their purity until the very end. Oliver slowly matures and loses his childhood only to regain it at the end of the novel. Many critics agree with the fact that Oliver should be perceived as a symbol, a representation of the Romantic Child uncorrupted by the outside world. The young orphan illustrates a form of goodness fighting against evil and according to Dickens himself “Shows in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last”.

Since the novel's first pages we can identify the difficult circumstances of Oliver's first cry. He has trouble drawing breath and a sequence of dramatic phrases illustrate the violence, the fragmentation of Oliver's existence and his lack of status for being an illegitimate child. The passage continues with a significant “despised by all, pitied by none”. Here, the author suggests a similarity with the savior. In the second chapter we are immediately informed that “for the next eight or ten months, Oliver was the victim of a systematic course of treachery and deception”. This evokes an analogy and an allusion to Milton's hell in *Paradise Lost* in “finding in the lowest depth and deeper still”. After we are left with the memorable scene in the dining hall when Oliver is nine and he is selected by a group of starving boys to step forward in the most famous moment of the novel: “The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged him. 'Please, sir, I want some more'. The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice. 'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.' The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arm; and shrieked aloud for the beadle."

Oliver is certainly a symbol, but he is also described with very humble human characteristics. After his birth we meet him again for his ninth birthday, described by the

narrator as “pale, thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature and decidedly small in circumference”. Here we may notice the contrast between his frail physique and the “sturdy spirit” that he will prove to have in the following years of his life. Such spirit and strong willed nature helps him survive the harsh treatment that he encounters in the workhouses, but he still retains his Original Innocence. His fairness and remarkable beauty cause susceptible people to trust him and love him on sight. For example, when Rose and her aunt see him lying injured on her bed, they refuse to accept and to consider him as “the pupil of robbers”. On the contrary, they immediately believe in him. Oliver does not undergo any dramatic changes except from transitioning from a fragile child into a more composed one. At first we see him meek and feeble, then, after he escapes to London, he shows great resilience. While in the workhouses, instead of crying and behaving emotionally, as most boys of his age would do, he moves on. Later on in the story, after being taken care by Maylie’s, he gives the impression of being calm and matured and the remains of his childhood appear only when he is excited by the visit of his old friend Dick.

Oliver Twist is set in a Victorian world of poverty and violence, yet the protagonist is continuously dependant upon the kindness of strangers, from the unspeakable Fagin to Mr Brownlows who temporarily rescues him from his life of crime. Such moments are more visible when realism is juxtaposed with melodrama and extremes of good and bad come to a contrast so sharply to represent a truthful and visionary struggle of spiritual forces between evil and good. Indeed, Fagin is likened to a devil, while Rose Maylie is compared to an angel “enthroned in mortal form”. At the same time Dickens creates characters of great complexity and evades from the mere simplicity of categorization. In this sense, Fagin is primarily a negative character but he also embodies a nurturing father figure becoming attractive and sinister at once.

As Oliver roams the streets of London at the mercy of a gang of criminals, he is saved by a gentleman, Mr Brownlows, who changes his fate. As Philip Marchand observes, “Classic British novels are full of benign father figures. There are no Mr Brownlows in the literature of the New World”. The critic conveys that there are numerous wicked or inadequate father figures in British literature as well, but what is striking is not *their presence* but the

existence of this other strain. In American literature, the father figure is either absent or demonic.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Pap is the antithesis of any kind of “ideal” father and his main concern is getting drunk every day until he doesn’t remember himself. Pap makes his son’s life much more complicated than all the rest of the people in the world. He represents all of world’s immorality and filthiness and even his appearance, “long and tangled and greasy hair and rags for clothes”, reminds Huck of his poverty. Most importantly, Pap is against Huck’s education. He resents Huck’s ability to read and write and be immersed in religious studies. The world of Widow Douglas, who agrees to take care of the boy, is a dangerous world in his mind. He forces Huck to stop his education and he wants his son to solely belong to him and ultimately keeps him in the forest in a cabin, isolated from the people who were willing to help, locking him there like an animal.

Huck is a marvelous and likeable boy. He leaves the printed page to become part of our own experience. He observes sharply the dark side of human nature and through the clear eyes of youth he sees the eternal stupidities and cruelties of the world. However, in spite of inferring the implications of adults’ behavior, he is unable to determine the factors that lead to such attitude and most of his comments about them remain rather generic: “Human beings can be awful cruel...”. Huck’s own conflict stems from the fact that he does not make ethical or moral judgments regarding society. On the contrary, he possesses a strong sense of ethics of his own, which is hidden from the others. Huck, the runaway, is in a different moral frame from all the other characters in the book and his membership in the world is made clear as he floats down the river, when, by using all his wits, he tries to stay away from all the troubles and he is constantly in “a sweat” over the problems of other people.

One of the main aspects representing a significant difference between the European and the American tradition is the social one. If in most of all the Dickensian heroes the intention of becoming a gentleman prevails by starting a suitable profession, by finding some form of wealth, or by becoming a respected member in a fast changing Victorian society, in Mark Twain’s masterpiece *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the protagonist is simply not interested enough in becoming a gentleman and, most importantly, he acts rather freely in

the world without the need of guidance or guardianship and creates a dream of freedom in America.

Curiously enough, it was a hundred years after America declared its Independence that Mark Twain published the first of his two quintessential American novels, fictions that use children to explore and define national identity and possibility. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) was initially received as work for children's entertainment but in fact addresses a grand theme that echoed in the literary scene- Can the promise of America as a new beginning of human society, dedicated to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness be fulfilled? Or, on the contrary, was it only possible to be fulfilled thirty or forty years before the Civil War, in a small town of a Western provincial state, and only possible for boys, especially those up to the age of fourteen or so? Were these few White boys, with "adventurous, troublesome ways" living in the slave state of Missouri back in the 1840s the last truly free American individuals? Did Wordsworth's idea of the loss of childhood apply not only to children but to nations as well? In a century that valued and worshipped progress this idealized nostalgic concept of the pure, uncorrupted child has haunted both European and American authors and thinkers. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, almost all the adults of the town of St Petersburg are compromised, diminished figures, snobbish and vindictive, and the only two men with any personal force are deviants, dangerous, criminals and murderers. By the time Twain published *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1885, after many starts and interruptions, his vision of American possibility had darkened and the characters of the boy had changed. Similarly to the past, any other adult character in this iconic novel is generally of negative, ordinary and unattractive nature. It is worth remembering that most of the myths surrounding Huck occupy a favoured place in the national consciousness. In 1935, on the fiftieth anniversary of *Huckleberry Finn*'s publication, F.Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "Huckleberry Finn took the first journey *back* at the republic from the perspective of the west. His eyes were the first eyes that ever looked at us objectively that were not the eyes from overseas. There were mountains at the frontier but he wanted more mountains to look at with his restive eyes- he wanted to find out about men and how they lived together. And because he turned back we have him forever". One of these is certainly the myth of Huck-the rebel. By running away from the rules, from that

oppressing “civilisation” that the adults have built and imposed, Huck establishes a kingdom of his own making where the codes of adulthood do not seem to be obeyed or followed. However, there is a distinction between Huck as a legendary rebel and the Huck that the author created in “Tom Sawyer”. There Twain describes Huck as a “romantic outcast”, a vision that does not fully represent what the writer had in mind. It is instead the vision that the boys of the village had about Huck who see him as someone who is free to come and go as he pleases, who is not expected to attend school or church, is free to swear and fight if he feels like it. Twain then allows us to see that although the boys’ vision of Huck is romantic, his life is not. If he can do as he pleases it is only because his father is the town drunk and his mother is dead. So it is not surprising to learn that Huck is prone to melancholy and is sometimes so sad that he almost wishes to die.

As he starts his voyage, Huck is as he wants to be, uncommitted. He has escaped from the widow and Pap and above everything he desires freedom from entangling alliances. His trip begins idyllically. Life is serene and Huck is at his most lyrical when he talks about the river and his raft. His escape, via river and raft, however, is only temporary; freedom soon becomes menaced as the world crowds in from both shores.

The novel “Huckleberry Finn” is remembered, according to Bowden, as “part of a marvelous nostalgic dream that haunts the American mind”, but is at the same time the story of a boy meeting evil and makes considerations about human nature which involve us all. Philip Young says that the book is so full of humor and idyll that it is easy to overlook the violence. There are thirteen corpses and almost every incident in the book ends brutally. Twain, then, does much more than giving us “a nostalgic dream”. Through Huck’s observations he exposes the grimier parts of our own selves. The reader enjoys identifying with the protagonist’s dreams of freedom.

Despite the book’s aiming at independence, both Tom and Huck experience more confinement and enclosure than liberty. The writer imagines more freedom as a form of resistance to various forms of incarceration than as a state of being to be explored. Almost all the adults are agents of confinement - schoolmasters, ministers, and repressive spinsters and widows. The few who resist are deviants, criminals and the inadequate ones.

Similarly, in *Oliver Twist*, London, like the oppressive “sivilisation” described by Huck, seems to be part of that overall system of control that threatens and entraps Oliver at every turn. The streets of the English capital are like a dire labyrinth while the country, on the other hand, is pure and harmonious. Throughout the novel, Dickens confronts the question of whether the terrible environment he depicts has the power to “blacken the soul and change its hue forever”. All the injustices and privations suffered by Oliver occur in cities. When the Maylies take the child to the countryside, he discovers “a new existence”. Dickens explains that even people who have spent their entire lives in “close and noisy places”, are likely in the last moments of their existences, to find comfort in half-imagined memories “of sky, and hill, and plain”. This is why country scenes within the novel have the great potential of erasing some of the vices and the corruption developed in the city. The country has the power to “purify our thoughts”. Dickens distinguishes the poor people living in the countryside “The poor people so neat and clean” living a life that is free from the squalor that torments and surrounds their urban counterparts. Oliver and his new family settle in a small village at the end of the novel, as if a happy ending would not be possible in the city. Dickens’s portrait of rural life is far more approving yet far less realistic than his depiction of urban life. This fact certainly supports the general estimation of Charles Dickens as a great urban writer and his distance from the countryside allows him to idealize it so powerfully.

We can certainly notice an idealized vision of the natural world. However, if *Oliver Twist* sees in the countryside the place for a happy ending, *Huckleberry Finn* finds in the river only a temporary happiness from the impositions of society. This represents a fundamental difference between the two boys as, unlike Huck, Oliver longs for the comfort of a family and for a reintegration in the society. In this sense, Huck breaks a tradition. He does not look for the guidance or the approval or the acceptance of an adult figure, nor he is an orphan disgraced with the death of his biological parents. He lives life according to his own rules, chooses the company of a black friend and refuses that entrance in the world of adulthood that Oliver instead seems to be happy to embrace. As readers, we are willing to understand and accept that *Oliver Twist* will grow up, become a husband, a father and ultimately grey and old. On the other hand, we seem to refuse the fact that time will touch

and affect Huck. We are inclined to appreciate more his temporary flights in search of freedom than a canonical happy ending for him.

Both boys come across as strong willed, resilient and extremely likeable to the reader, each one in his own unique way.

Interestingly enough, one of the most controversial aspects about *Oliver Twist* is that the young orphan speaks proper English in spite of being raised in a workhouse. Considering that he has barely received an education thus he cannot read or write, he is surprisingly eloquent. He only learns these skills while living with Maylie. Oliver is not even speaking in dialect, which is the language he would be hearing during most of his life. Similarly, when talking with his friend Dick, he speaks proper English as well. This element helps us point out a substantial difference with his American counterpart, Huckleberry Finn. Oliver, unlike Huck, displays a high level of morality and piety. Being pious at the time was indeed one of the attributes a respectable person should have possessed. However, Oliver was never taught how to pray, nor to distinguish good from bad and from the text we only seem to infer that he has been following orders and bowing down before his benefactors.

This is a fundamental turning point in our comparison of the two boys. In fact, in Mark Twain's masterpiece there are two systems of belief represented: formal religion, namely Christianity, and superstition. The educated and the "civilized", like the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, practice Christianity, whereas the uneducated and the poor, like Huck and Jim, have superstitions. Huck, despite the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson's tutelage, has an immediate aversion to Christianity on the basis that it takes too much stock in the dead and not enough in the living, that Christian Heaven is populated by boringly rigid people like Miss Watson, while Hell seems more exciting.

On the other hand, Huck and Jim's idea of superstition consists of reading "bad signs" almost into everything and when something negative happens, they simply blame the dangerous and malevolent nature around them.

This is why a number of critics⁷ have considered the novel as "a socially dangerous novel" due to the unorthodox behavior of Huck, his lack of a formal education or his attitude towards any religious teaching. Twain intentionally adopts a very low register for his young hero making him sound uncultivated and innocent. From its first publication in 1884 and

1885 the novel has been subjected to bitter criticism and during the late nineteenth century the book was disparaged as coarse, unrefined, irreverent, and vulgar. The Concord, Massachusetts, Public Library called it “trash of the veriest sort”, while during the twentieth century it was condemned for its frequent use of racial expletives, its condescending portrait of the runaway Jim and its misogyny, depicting women either as nurturers or as controlling and repressive figures. On the contrary, Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* broke the tradition of the Victorian sexless, pure and intelligent moral. Although the novel was written at a time of idealized Victorian womanhood, the English author feels concern for the fallen women and he also depicts libidinal women. Dickens was well aware of prostitution as a social issue of his time. He was fascinated by murders and prisons and his writing about Nancy’s murder in the novel “drove all the breath out of his body”. He felt great sympathy for fallen and poor women and saw them as victims of society. Dickens was deeply attracted by this different category opposed to the classic vision of the domestic woman strictly dedicated to the universe of the household and a victim of confinement herself. If the concept of morality plays had a major role in the Grand English tradition, especially during the Victorian Era, when having good morals and virtues was very important, in *Huckleberry Finn* it becomes a much more marginal aspect. Mark Twain begins the book by telling his readers that they should not look for a plot or a moral lesson. That is simply not the aim of his novel, whose structure is episodic and whose protagonist experiences several internal conflicts dealing with society’s values and expectations. Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with a strong critical view of culture and society in the United States. We may agree with the fact that both Dickens and Twain express a social critique of the society of their times. Dickens tends to criticize the effects of the New Poor Law of the 1834, an Act which for many liberal Victorians appeared to criminalize the poor. Mark Twain set the novel several decades prior the abolition of slavery in the United States. Although he wrote the story two decades after the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, America, and especially the South, was still struggling with racism and the aftereffects of slavery. Race relations which seemed to be improving in the years following the Civil War, once again became strained. The imposition of the Jim Crow laws, designed to limit the power of the African-American

population in the South, brought the beginning of a new, insidious effort to oppress black people. The new racism of the South, less institutionalized and monolithic, was also more difficult to contrast. In this light, we might read Twain's depiction of slavery as an allegorical representation of blacks in the United States even after the abolition of slavery. In fact, the novel presents an author-narrator relationship of a different kind. That is to say that Twain's perspective is antislavery and Huck's is not and that the concept of social prejudice is meaningful to the author but not to the boy. Huck's "restive eyes" are inevitably clouded with ideas that he has received from society as opposed to the much clearer vision of Twain's own eyes. The story is told by a boy and expresses a boy's need to find a future with his innocence and his ability to redeem a fallen world. Twain does use Huck to assert the rights of the white American family, but he also uses him to explore alternative ideas of social organization. Moreover, the author increasingly supports the idea that the child is no longer a sufficient motive for believing in and projecting a future. Twain shows how far the nation has fallen short of what it should be, by showing how it is failing its children. Life, the novel implies, should be primarily about how to deliver the future to the child. In the novel the writer criticizes family and the moral and behavioral restraints that are associated with it. His America is judged on its ability to sustain child-centred social structures while Huck and Jim create an alternative domesticity on the raft. They break through their boundaries that their society has created between the white, "superior" and the black, "inferior", between the ones who own and the ones who are owned. Huck and Jim learn how to depend upon each other although their cross-racial friendship is dominated by "impossibility". On the one hand Twain revises the social dominant structures of the time, on the other, he also makes it hard for his characters to imagine a satisfactory ending and future. The boys move far away from a difficult present and towards an ideal freedom in the future. Huck is a pioneer who will pave the way for other spirited American children. The idea of a future that is "freedom" and "independence" is familiar to the self-assertive, capitalist, philosophical concept that is so fundamental in the United States.

At the end of the book, the boy hero is left in suspension once again. Unlike Oliver, Pip and David Copperfield who make it and become contributive particles of the great big world,

the American boy has been rejected from the society he has known and although he anticipates a future that is fanciful, he will probably end up reproducing a copy of what he is leaving behind, another “sivilization”. Twain himself was not happy with this vision. He kept trying to make more room of a future for Huckleberry Finn but he could not manage it. He began writing a sequel in 1884 with the title *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians*, but dropped the novel when he realized that the plot and the depiction of the Native-Americans were too violent and could have not been offered as “children’s story”. We would like to think that although *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is about a boy, and whatever lessons it sets out to give, it cannot decide completely upon the future of the child. Twain was wary of the American future or of the violence that was going to prevail in the society of his time and he was often taken with the idea that “no future” was better than anything else, especially for the child. That is why we would like to imagine these boys as free individuals who still go on researching. We cannot be sure what this research might involve; maybe “the pursuit of happiness” or a good job in the City, a vagabond life or a respectable one, somewhere near the river banks of the Mississippi or in the streets of the East End...

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Notes

¹ Claire Wood. “*Oliver Twist: A Patchwork of Genres*”. University of York, 2014.

² Nina Wirth-Nesher. *The Literary Orphan as National Hero: Huck and Pip*; Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction; AMS Press, 1986.

³ Claudia Durst Johnson, *Understanding Huckleberry Finn*, New York, 1996.

⁴ Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel*, p.132.

⁵ T.S: Eliot, “Introduction”. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London, 1950), pp-xii-xiii-.

CHAPTER 2

WAKE UP AND BE AN ADULT! WHEN BOYS WILL BE MEN.

In many different ways, the figure of “the boy” has been one of the main subjects of nineteenth century literature of the United States. Characters like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn have largely become symbols of many types of social, political and moral systems. Also, the boy has become a model for American exceptionalism; he is individualist, self-reliant and, just like his young nation, innocent. He is also adventurous, mobile and escapes many schemes including an emasculating culture, to live according to his own rules and truths.

According to Leslie Fiedler part of the American myth is represented by the theme of boyhood. The critic recognizes in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby-Dick* two of the most popular and “absorbed” masterpieces in the nation’s heritage. Such books are undeniably very different both in language and technique but they are also seen as boy’s books *par excellence*. This aspect has been widely explored and developed by other American writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Ernest Hemingway, whose male characters often criticize the suffocating limits and bonds of domesticity. Natty Bumppo is associated with the vanishing wilderness as an idealized figure, wifeless and childless, hauntingly loyal to his way of life. Ishmael setting off on the Queequeg, arm in arm united to ship out, Huck and Jim swimming beside the raft by the peaceful Mississippi River: all these male characters refuse the passivity of a domestic, enclosed existence in order to embrace and choose adventure.

The purpose of this second chapter is to analyze and reflect upon two male characters that have been less canonized in the wider context of American Literature. The two boys in question are Redburn, the young Melvillean hero and Laurie, the only male character in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. In this chapter I intend to temporarily distance myself

from the novels that are the main focus of my research and take a step back in time in order to reflect upon two different types of boyhoods compared to the ones that are the object of my studies. After the first Chapter which has been dedicated to the analysis of the classic *bildungsromans* created by Charles Dickens, I continue my thesis by focusing on a case of “a failed bildungsroman” in *Redburn*, where the protagonist is confronted with the squalor and the disappointment of his first adult experience while employed as a sailor on a ship. Similarly, we see in Laurie a “Death of Boyhood”, as he gives up his artistic and fugitive vocation to be free and to “run away” from his guardians for the sake of being a gentleman and follow what is expected of him.

In both novels, there is a solid perception that not only the adult life marks the end of a genuine and carefree existence, but it turns out to be brutal, unappealing and bitter.

Unlike Huck, these two boys have been unable to run away and by abiding by the rules of the adults have renounced the life that they dreamed of having when they were children.

The nineteenth century has produced a large and diversified number of young male protagonists in American literature and this time I will focus on *Redburn* and Laurie who have been more obedient, less independent and consequently less free.

Interestingly enough, during the first half of the nineteenth century a vast production of writings of a pedagogical nature around “the boy” was written. Authors such as Jacob Abbott and Louisa May Alcott have meticulously reflected about teenagers and education of kids inside and outside the home, and have contributed to outlining their traits, their discipline and their entrance in the adult life. Back in the nineteenth century, strict discipline or physical punishments would have been some key aspects when bringing up a boy and many theorists have expressed concerns about such counterproductive management strategies and “domestic education”, as they often deeply contrast with “the boy’s nature”, which often develops in opposition to the home.

Both Melville’s *Redburn* and Alcott’s Laurie from *Little Women* reflect the sense of torment in their struggle to “be a man”.

“MAY I NEVER BE A MAN”: REDBURN AND THE FAILURE OF THE COME OF AGE IN AMERICA.

It is not such a mystery that in the vast production of American literature, often male escape fantasies are defined by a longing to be free from women or from what they represent. Novels such as *Moby-Dick* and Cooper's *Leather Stocking Tales* were canonized by critics who felt that these texts advocated an ideal American manhood by celebrating the protagonist's flight from “feminizing” civilization and his refusal to submit to the limits of home life. They portray the trajectory of young men's push to leave the feminine instruction of the home for an independent life beyond the influence of Mother-love. Men have left home and tried on a number of new identities to fit into the masculine world to escape their fixed identity within the sentimental family and seek out a life of adventure and sometimes profit.

In *Redburn*, Melville is particularly interested in the way capitalism and democracy shaped middle-class male identity in America. The novel, a fictional autobiography set in the Jacksonian era, is his first attempt to explore these aspects in a realistic setting. Melville originally intended the story to be a “plain, straightforward, amusing narrative” (qtd in Leyda 3016) that would win back the popular audience he had lost with *Mardi*.

Like some of his early works, the novel shows Melville's sense of displacement from the protection of his family into misfortune, and his search for a vocation. His work navigates the difficulty and often the tumultuous transition from boyhood to manhood. The boy discovers that the reality of men's life has little resemblance to the autonomy, authority, and self-reliance imagined.

In going to sea, Redburn faced cramped quarters of rotten, roach-infested ships, tyrannical captains, and rigid forms of discipline that treated him a brute to be controlled with dreams of rum or whipped into obedience and submission.

Like many young men with a limited formal education, Melville left his home and close-knit to find his fortune at sea.

In Antebellum America signing on to a whaling ship was seen by the gentility as an act of

despair. For the author Ishmael signing on is the impulsive act of a young man who wishes to see the world and prove himself. Ishmael is not a boy and his adventure aboard the *Queequeg* is already an experience that belongs to the context of adulthood. He belongs to that tradition of American male adults, those who abandon a home, a secure profession in order to set free and see the world. The world of adulthood is very different from childhood or adolescence as it often appears brutal and difficult to cope with.

Published in 1849, *Redburn* centers in the problem of maturity. While some have read it as a classic story of initiation, I see the novel as part of a tradition of nineteenth century American literary production that contrasts the conventional coming-of-age plot and offers instead an inverted, interrupted and overall unconventional life narrative.¹ As failed *bildungsromans*, such fictions disrupt the traditional linkage of narrative development and character maturation. Certainly, other scholars have read classic American literature as childish or hostile to the demand of adult masculinity. Leslie Fiedler famously diagnosed the American literary tradition as “almost juvenile”, nothing the compulsive “return to a limited world of experience, usually associated with childhood”.²

In *Redburn* Melville debunks maturity for the individual and for the nation. He unmasks mature manhood as corrupt, limiting and unnatural. In fact, when the main hero finds himself in the new English society and experiences the world he had been dreaming about, he unveils scenes of corruption and decadence.

Written by a mature narrator who has been through “far more perilous scenes than narrated in this “series of adventures”, the novel tells the story of Wellingborough Redburn, the young, naïve, and innocent son of a gentleman. The maturity of the narrator, juxtaposed with the demands of retrospective narrative (the narrator putting himself in the shoes of his young protagonist), give rise to two levels of experience in the novel. The first depicts the adventures of young Redburn, while the second gives a more philosophical observation of the more mature protagonist. The novel, in fact, tells two stories at once. One is about the orphan seeking himself while the other is about a bachelor, the retrospective narrator, who expresses his lack of desire for marriage and family life. At first, we realize that a bachelor and an orphan could not be any more different, yet, as we continue the narration, they eventually converge in a single person. The choice of an innocent and simple Redburn as

the protagonist of this book, is intended to crystallize, if not to magnify, the difference between the pure young man and the world around him.

This juxtaposition of a young character with the world shapes the initial dialectic of the novel: an innocent and aspiring youth versus an oppressive and deceptive society.

After his father's death and the bankruptcy experienced by his family, the boy mourns him by passing hours in reverie over a glass ship, a gift his father gave to him. His journey is motivated by financial necessity which sends him to sea in the merchant service.

Redburn decides to travel to Liverpool and England, a destination that was familiar amongst his father's shelf of old guidebooks. But this encounter with the English City only proves that "the thing that had guided his father, could not guide his son" (157). The first step of the hero's departure from home leads him to the hostile universe of the ferry-boat. The boy is faced with the hostility and indifference of the other passengers. This early experience on the ferry-boat is but a token of what our hero will encounter. The moment he leaves home, he is plagued with hunger, difficulty and frustration. He suffers humiliation, disappointment and loneliness. The captain of the *Highlander* proves no father to the boy; his fellow sailors, no family. He calls himself "a sort of Ishmael in the ship". (62)

Although the journey motif suggests the traditional shift from innocence to experience, this rite of passage is at best equivocal, since the lesson of the voyage is the connection between isolation and self-preservation in a world in which individual survival is ultimately dependent upon an arbitrary fate.

Aboard the Highlander, he is baptized "Buttons" and he is brought down from the status of the son of a gentleman and becomes initiated into the affairs of life on board. Now, at the bottom of the social scale he is literally isolated and this isolation allows him to observe and comment on what he sees. As we know, he sees evil.

It is important to mention that for the framework of his story Melville selected liberally from the events of his youth and his voyage to Liverpool late in his twentieth year. His homes on Bleecker Street and Broadway become Redburn's "in old Greenwich Street". Alan Melvill, like Walter Redburn, was an importer of French goods and a veteran of many voyages across the Atlantic. In Melville's home there were most certainly French and English books and the old European guidebooks that delighted Redburn. Both the author

and his fictional hero declaimed speeches on the stage of the high school. Both enjoyed happiness, comfort, and great expectations as the sons of well-to-do gentlemen. Both suffered spiritually and physically as a result of the bankruptcies and early deaths of their fathers.

Despite these parallels, Melville romanticized freely in working up the materials of his youth. The central fact in Melville's artistry is that he conceives Redburn as a young boy. All the physical trials and the emotional anguish are intensified in poignancy because they happen to a wide-eyed adolescent. "I was then but a boy," says the protagonist on the very first page. His age, we judge, is about fifteen, for he is eight years younger than his brother, who is evidently in his early twenties. Later, Redburn describes himself as "young and small" and "quite young and raw", and he speaks of his "boy's bulk" and his small backbone. He is a pathetic character, pious, tender, and courageous but at the same time, he is still untried and full of boyish illusions. He has never had to work before he enters a sailor's life. He has very limited knowledge of what physical equipment to take with him, he knows nothing about the sea and he is uninformed about the city to which he is bound. The appeal of the story is that it is founded on the youthful hero's complete inexperience and immaturity. Melville developed a younger character and looked at the harsh realities of the world largely through his eyes. He sought to create the drama in the struggles of a completely inexperienced boy against an environment that nearly overwhelms him. As the author drafted the story of the poor, embittered, outcast Redburn, he also introduced scores of artistic embellishments on his own experience. It is undoubtedly true that his own motives for going to sea are reflected in the ones expressed by his hero. As the latter explains it: "Sad disappointments in several plans which I had sketched for my future life; the necessity of doing something for myself, united to a naturally roving disposition, had now conspired within me, to send me to sea as a sailor".³

Here the unmistakable echoes of Melville's failures to find work in his chosen career of surveying and engineering and perhaps a defeated ambition to write.

It is worth mentioning that boys, and, in particular, men who chose freedom over stability were often seen as extravagant or even unsuccessful members of society during these years. Even when in England, Redburn discovers a world made of squalor far from what he

had imagined or dreamed of. To the poverty and beggary of Liverpool Melville devotes several pages of impassioned social protest and he also stresses the similarities between the visited city and New York. "It was the humiliating fact...that upon the whole, and barring the poverty and beggary, Liverpool, away from the docks, was very much such a place as New York. There were the same sorts of streets pretty much; the same rows of houses with stone steps; the same kind of sidewalks and curbs; and the same elbowing, heartless-looking crowd as ever". 56

The young protagonist, as the author himself, observed the sordid parade of vice and crime during his visit in England and soon becomes bored and homesick. The trip had undoubtedly disillusioned him. From a decent and pious environment, the boy had plunged into a universe of drunkenness and profanity. His mind turns to America and home and the "St. Lawrence" must have looked ultimately like the vehicle of a new escape. Yet, it is not the comedy of inexperience that makes the characterization of Redburn significant. It is the tragedy of learning the hopeless gap between the supposed and the real, the tragedy of innocence, idealism, and brotherhood exposed to a world of evil, cynicism, and self-interest.

LAURIE AND "THE DEATH OF BOYHOOD"

In *Little Women*, Alcott investigates familial relationships and the ways that discipline could be directed at kids and young men by family members and guardians. My analysis here will concern two of the main characters in the novel; Jo and Laurie.

This section questions also the validity of gender stereotypes, both male and female. Josephine March, is definitely an unconventional woman. In her desires and pursuits she contrasts the gender expectations typical of her time. For example, she wants to earn a living, she wants to go to war, she swears, spoils her gloves and dresses and speaks up at all times. As a result, her sisters do not see her being very feminine.

Similarly, Laurie struggles with his grandfather expectations of him, quite alike to the way Jo struggles to be a lady. He does not want to be a conventional man. He wants to pursue

music, at the times a culturally feminine career, instead of business, a masculine occupation.

Throughout the nineteenth century, adolescents were often expected to enter their fathers' businesses. A case in point is the novel released by Louisa May Alcott, *We Boys*, that dramatizes this experience and expectation. The narrator talks about the occupation of his best friend's father: "My father's a cashier and I think that a cashier is the stupidest business". (7) But in the epilogue, we learn that both boys-now men-have the same jobs as their fathers. The same kinds of sentiments are held by Laurie, the only boy character in *Little Women*. This is particularly evident when he says to Jo "I ought to please grandfather, and I do try, but it's working against the grain, you see".

Also, we have to consider that generally nineteenth century adolescents tend to reflect both the hopes and the fears of a changing nation. The characters are driven by anxiety over how society was rapidly changing and developing in America. The child development parallels the one of the country and both share the apprehension that change inevitably brings.

Elizabeth Keyser and Anne Dalke have noted that *Little Women* dramatizes Laurie's struggle with patriarchal expectations. Keyser observes that he "exemplifies" the masculine plight, yet she does not explore what "the masculine plight" is, how Laurie represents this dilemma, or what cultural beliefs shape it. (Whispers 66-67).

Alcott, however, saw herself as an author who celebrated, defended, and explained boys and their lives to a culture that she believed often mistreated and misunderstood them.

Boyhood has been often considered an issue, as kids were seen as less refined and more "difficult" than girls. This is why in literature "boys' adventure novels were diametrically opposed to the girls' domestic novel. For her, Laurie's experiences are conditioned by the kinds of patriarchal and materialist ideologies that affected girls' lives. The specific ideologies are, of course, historically contingent; Laurie, for example, is allowed and encouraged to attend college, but Jo is not. For boys, though, the pressure to live up to the standards and achievements of other males (especially the pressure to succeed in the market) and the shame they feel when they fail, have, in some sense, always circumscribed their field of possibilities, as it circumscribes Laurie's. Therefore, like many other fictional young men, Laurie is not free to pursue the career he wants. A boy knew that he would

never be viewed as a man unless he was financially productive. This is probably why many boys and men fantasized about “breaking away”.

Using masculinity in America during the nineteenth century by Rotundo, Michael Kimmel and Judy Hilkey, I examine Laurie’s struggle to conform to the materialist pressures that his grandfather wishes for him. Alcott herself reveals that the dream of breaking away is difficult for both sexes and extremely difficult to come true.

In this novel we notice how both Laurie and Jo fail to adapt and conform to the gender stereotypes of their time.

In the section of *Little Women* “Castles in the Air” we notice how the aspirations of Laurie and the March girls are equally improbable; Meg wishes to marry for love but “with nice food, pretty clothes and handsome furniture and heaps of money”. Jo’s book will make her “rich and famous”. Amy will become “the best artist in the whole world” while Beth wants “to stay at home safe with her mother and father” hoping that nothing will ever change. As the author says “these air castles” must be abandoned by little men and women alike. Laurie tells Jo he wants to run away to Washington: “What fun you’d have!” Jo replies: “I wish I could run off, too...If I was a boy, we’d run away together, and have a capital time; but as I am a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stay at home. Don’t tempt me, Teddy, it’s a crazy plan”. In spite of the romance of escape, she believes that Laurie’s interests are best served by remaining, so she organizes a truce to keep him at home.

Critics tend to take Jo’s comments as reiterating a cultural truth: boys can run away, but girls must submit. Ann Murphy, for instance, claims that “as a boy, Jo would be free to run away” while John Crawley has argued that Laurie wants to run away in order to escape his domesticity. Just like Huck, Laurie is metaphorically running away from an imposed civilization, too. In addition to that, “Jo’s dying” to go to war suggests that staying at home/growing up into womanhood is itself a kind of death, though not a glorious one. Jo’s impulse to go to war expresses her will to be powerful and aggressive although she eventually transforms from a tomboy into a “little woman”.

Perhaps critics have not explored enough the parallels between Laurie’s and the March girls narratives because Alcott often celebrated boyhood in her letters and journals and set in opposition to her life as a girl and a woman, a life filled with restrictions and

disappointments. The joy and freedom she could not imagine for herself, she sometimes associated with the universe of boys. In October 1860, for example, Alcott saw the Prince of Wales while he was on a tour of the United States. “Boys are always jolly”, she pointed out, “even princes” (Journal 100).

Possibly because of this idealization, it is believed that Jo articulates a truth about boyhood when she says that “boys always have a capital time”. But in *Little Women*, Laurie’s story and torment show that Alcott’s ideas about the lives of boys are more complex, and the text rarely makes any idealizing claims about boyhood. Laurie is rather restricted and confined at home himself and he is definitely not “always jolly, he is incredibly wealthy but sad. Jo exclaims, “Theodore Lawrence, you ought to be the happiest boy in the world”. (52)

Laurie’s unhappiness results from his place in a world of men and the concurrent pressure of proving himself to be a man to the novel’s characters. As Kimmel notes, this pressure is a definite feature of American masculinity in the nineteenth century (Manhood IX), the era that the historian Joe Dubbert calls “the masculine century” (A Man’s Place 13)

Gilded Age success manuals for young men published around the time of *Little Women* often depict a boy’s life as fraught with anxiety. They present him as prone to worrying and suffering from “dissatisfaction with his destiny.” (Hilkey 76)

Similarly, Alcott introduces us to Laurie as a lonely, frustrated young man. Unlike the nurturing domestic circle of the March girls and their mother which leaves room for creativity and personal interests, Laurie’s world is an isolated male enclave composed of his grandfather and his tutor, John Brooke, both of whom are grooming him for a life he does not want. Growing up and claiming a place in the great, big world is inevitably a source of personal crisis, confusion and, often loneliness. All these boys wish to go far away in order to be free. Being free at home is simply not possible for the American young males. Therefore, they dream of setting off to Washington, to sea, off the Reservation or off to the Mississippi. American boyhood is inevitably a lonesome experience which counteracts the codes of adulthood and of bourgeois values to simply settle down, be successful and earn a good living. These young men make unpopular choices, are misunderstood, often disregarded and mistreated but remain the only beholders of their own future. For the first time we learn that the experience of becoming a man, an adult, a free

agent is possible without the continuous intervention of adults and guardians. These heroes will not follow the footsteps of their predecessors but reinvent a totally new way of living life. Laurie does, and he gives up to the dream of having a capital time, of being an artist. He marries Amy March, who supports the same views of his grandfather and tutor. In fact, love and marriage represent two important themes in *Little Women*; such aspects remain key for all three March sisters who reach adulthood, while for Jo, who seems inevitably destined for the appealing Laurie, is only a secondary goal in her life.

On the contrary, Huck, Thomas Builds the Fire, Victor and the multiple Juniors that live on the Spokane Reservation, are there, exploring and experimenting alternative ways of living and coping. All of them are often disobedient, they do not listen to lectures and ignore the adults' warnings and threatens. They risk their welfare, their life and dignity to express themselves in their own way and portray an original manhood for the first time.

I find particularly poignant that in most characters, from Huck, to the Juniors and Arnolds of Sherman Alexie, as soon as they find themselves away from parents, teachers or domestic spaces, all the pedagogical imperatives immediately dissolve and then, they are in charge of their own pedagogical teachings. We can agree that the discipline of boys has been to a certain extent, an invention of the adults which is however, only limited to a small and limited homely context. In American fiction the young male adults have the liberty of managing and disciplining themselves. These exchanges and subversion of roles are particularly evident in Huck and Tom, mischievous but good-hearted who, very much like the author himself, search release from the pressures of adulthood. The novel is voluntarily set in a nostalgic past when life was simpler and Huck is free to relive in his childhood. For example, if we compare a domestic novel mainly addressed to girls like *Little Women* to an adventure and satire novel for boys like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we realize that they present opposite views on the questions raised

during the second half of the nineteenth century. In fact, the protagonists of the first book naturally accept the guidance and advice of the grown up world. Adults follow the development of the children and encourage them to tell the truth, while Huck distrusts them and defends himself by telling lies. However, in both novels, as readers, we are invited to believe and to trust in the good-hearted nature of the protagonists. Even when Huck

declares “All right, then, I’ll go to hell”, we never question or doubt his innate goodness. Moreover, we seem to worry much more about Huck than the March girls, who seem to have clear objectives about their future. On the contrary, we are concerned about Huck and all the troubles that have happened to him that would have overwhelmed everyone else, adults and children alike.

He has been beaten up, imprisoned and almost killed by his abusive father. He nearly drowns to death, miraculously survives a number of disastrous situations and becomes exposed to more than thirty deaths. Huck sees death all the time around him and somehow, becomes immune from its meaning. The young hero lacks ambition in a conventional way and he is often portrayed in solitude. In fact, when we first meet Huck in the sixth chapter of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), he is described as “idle and lawless and vulgar and bad”. Idleness is another feature of his and, indeed, a characteristic of children as well. Huck elongates this “state of grace” by refusing and delaying any possible choice about his adult life.

An example of how Mark Twain draws on this sentiment of independence and disobedience is when Huck sets off to Jackson’s Island to play in solitude. Jackson’s Island precarious position in the currents and channels of the Mississippi makes it a figurative no-man’s place where the boy seeks an identity free of the Christianity of Miss Watson and his filial entanglements with Pap. Here, the boy is a castaway adventurer. But Twain, who never misses the opportunity for satire, associates Huck’s fantasies of escape with the town’s mourning of his own death. Huck declares “I got a good place amongst the leaves, and set there on a log, munching the bread and watching the ferry-boat, and very well satisfied”. The bread that is floated down the river intended for his spirit feeds his actual body and the boy remains free to live there to do what he likes.

The element of danger is always present and in particular, that sort of danger that is caused by prolonged isolation. By abandoning their past and their guardians the young heroes inevitably turn down any form of protection. Yet the search for security is not something that these children long for. They would rather be exposed to the many perils that independence may bring instead of feeling secured but trapped. Twain’s device makes possible for a little good to overcome a lot of bad. It is next to impossible to imagine Huck

growing up, for us he remains a child although, like everyone else, he is destined to change. It is the idea of change that gives him anxiety and fear, too.

It is not without reason that at the conclusion of *Tom Sawyer* the author warns us that the novel is “strictly a history of a boy” and must stop because “the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a man”. Huck reacts against the world that is coming at him and remains intact in the literary American imaginary.

This is why in my thesis the words man and boy will occupy separate domains. Because it is inevitable that children will grow up. All of them.

Notes

¹ Michael David Bell, "Melville's Redburn: Initiation and Authority". *New England Quarterly* 39 (1967):279-297

² Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003).

³ Michael David Bell, "Melville's Redburn: Initiation and Authority". *New England Quarterly* 39 (1967):279-297

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CHAPTER 3

RUNAWAY DARLINGS WON'T COME BACK.

"All children, except one, grow up."

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

When essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson issued his famous challenge to all Americans to declare their cultural independence from "Old World", he could have hardly imagined a more powerful response than the one that Mark Twain would be giving forty years later writing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The novel is a portrayal of community life in a small village along the iconic Mississippi River where the residents, old and young, established and marginal, poor and rich go about the business of living

Except for *Moby-Dick* and possibly *The Scarlet Letter*, no other work in American literature has received so much attention like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Into this natural setting comes Huck, the essential American picaro, the slangy, visionary, orphaned wanderer, precursor even of Jewish wanderers in the cities such as J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield to Frederik Karl. We may agree with the fact that all American picaresque protagonists derive from Huck: part pragmatist, part solitary, striving to master the vast American landscape by straying freely. The novel has come to be recognized as the best portrait of American boyhood and celebrates the boy's liberated imagination and at the same time indicates the influence of adult authority. In fact, at the beginning of the mid nineteenth century, little boys were permitted to leave the constraining influence of matriarchal domesticity. They wore old trousers, roamed around in little gang-like bands, had adventures and were generally unruly, at times even cruel and rather delinquent. The novel is a celebration of American individualism and it is also a condemnation of that other side of America: its stifling conformity. Perhaps no other children's adventure story invokes so many different forms of violence and brutality, imposed not by wild animals, monsters or strange villains or creatures, but by ordinary men and women living in simple

places we call home. This is the “civilized” world that the boy subversively renames as “sivilized”, and nothing in this violent setting is presented as more harmful than slavery. In fact, at the heart of the story is Huck’s relationship with another young man, Jim, who is identified not as a father, a husband, an individual in his own right, but as a property of another man. His escape is a search not for a family but for his confiscated humanity. While the other characters are presented through Huck’s eyes, Huck himself is redefined and transformed by his friendship with Jim. Mark Twain once defined his work as “a book of mine where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat”. The boy’s relationship with the slave leads him to discover the true meaning of morality. There is no doubt that *Huckleberry Finn* is not a novel about morality in a traditional way but it teaches us readers to tell a story in another way, from another perspective. It is its being amoral one of the most fascinating elements of the book. It is not a *bildungsroman*, nor its contrary. It is the story of an escape along the river and in a certain sense, with an unhappy ending. There is no hint of redemption and at the end we are not really sure what the destiny of the protagonist is going to be.

There is no doubt about the canonization of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the American literary scenario. Part of its meaning is represented by the necessity of securing a future for the American child. The child here is also closely connected to the need for the young nation to project and determine its future. At the same time, Twain uses Huck to assert and explore the rights of the white American family, but also to explore alternative ideas of social organisation. At times the author finds that the idea of the child is no longer a sufficient motive for believing and projecting a future and as readers we are often invited towards its impossibility both for the nation and for its children. In fact, Mark Twain himself was not convinced that every child should live and have a future. From time to time he hinted that children should die young, or not to be born at all. And yet the prevailing image of him is a man in sympathy with the youngsters. His most famous novel is told by a child, and is about that child’s needs to find a future. The book is also meant to be good for the young, and about the goodness of the young; their innocence and their ability to redeem a fallen world. As the Managing Editor of *Time* remembered for the magazine’s 2008 special Twain issue:

For a kid from the suburbs, the picaresque story of Huck and Jim was wonderfully exotic. Who didn't want to live along the Mississippi and drift down the river on a skiff? The buddy story of Huck and Jim was not only a model of American adventure and literature but also of deep friendship and loyalty.¹

In the form of a "buddy story", Twain offers an escape from the suburbs and back to nature. There is the boy protagonist, but also a more generalised "Children-ness". This latter one in the novel has been argued out in negative as well as positive terms. For the negative, one might start with Louisa May Alcott who attacked Twain because, she believed, he did not have the child's best interests at heart. She declared: "If Mr Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure minded lads and lasses, he had best to stop writing for them".²

Alcott's fears over Twain's impurity and its influence on young readers were widely shared by contemporaries. This would be demonstrated by other early reviews, and by banning of the novel by the Concord Public Library. Over time, these fears were supplemented by other concerns. In 1957, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People condemned the novel as racist, and many have argued since that, with its use of the n-word, *Huckleberry Finn* should never enter the nation's classroom.³

Surrounding the arguments as to whether the arguments as to whether the stories of Huck, Tom and Jim are "good for children" or "bad for children", there is the broader question of the development of the child in a cultural-political debate. The future of the child seems to be deeply influenced by what adults had in mind for him. In Mark Twain's novel there is a significant turning point, as his boys refuse to conform to that vision of future modelled only by their guardians. The social and moral background that surrounds Huck, in the fiction and in the criticism, is all oriented around the need to deliver a meaningful future to the child, or at least for the character to work out his own way to such a future. But Twain could not project a worthwhile future for his young heroes. He rejected all the usual plots, and attempted to find something to put in their place. An early death became his preferred option. It is not that he did not engage in "children-ness", or long for a future that would be progress. But finally, he could not believe that America, or any other nation, could or should make the "promise of happiness". Twain announces at the start of the novel a

research and refusal of the future, especially as it “relates to parents and children”. This is particularly clear in the “NOTICE” which prefaces *Huckleberry Finn*.

“Persons attempting to find a motive in his narrative will be prosecuted: persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished: persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.”⁴

Even though the author cannot really shoot nor prosecute us, as readers, we are immediately invited to think about the writer’s dislike of the pious moralising which can be found in a number of the children’s fiction of the day. Twain ridiculed Sunday school stories and all their predictable outcomes. He always maintained a satirical attitude toward them. Some of them are “The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did not Prosper” (1865) and “The Story of the Bad little Boy that Bore a Charmed life” (1870). In his NOTICE, with an ultimately comical vein, Twain informs us that he is not writing about conventionally “good” and “bad” characters. He is not interested in expressing any moral judgement whatsoever. We will read his children and their lives in our own way and beyond the author’s regulation. Here, new values and an innovative vision are introduced and the writer expresses in the “NOTICE” a tension between the idea that the future should be controlled and enforced, and a desire that it should not be- that it may be open, inventive, occasional and surprising, or indeed that it may dwindle into nothing. In the novel it is possible to identify the opposition between an adult vision of the future and a child future. It is interesting to mention that often the terms, values and positions are not clear. The author, on one hand, is very careful in distinguishing “the child” from “the childishness”. For Twain, the latter is only an ensemble of rules and cruelties; for example when Huck releases Jim not because he feels sympathy for his being a slave and an African American, but because he belongs to Miss Watson. However, such aspects and characteristics can be found in the adults as well; they tell tall stories and lies, they are cruel and act out the extreme. Huck and Jim are both denied full adulthood by their society; one for being a boy and the other because he is a slave. But gradually, they become adults’ unacknowledged adults: they learn to practice a General Grant-like removal from the haphazard violence of life on the shore. And most importantly, the two boys stand in contrast to the most self-conscious adults they meet, the Grangerfords. The family also extend their strict and oppressive approach to their daughter, Sophia, in particular when she

elopes with the son of a rival family. Sophia, as well, has restricted freedom and she is not allowed to marry the man that she loves but when she runs away her family take to arms to assert their rights on the girl and her future. During this section of the novel we realize how both sons and daughters, as well as African-Americans, are victims of control and how they tend to be often subjugated. This model of parental ownership leads us towards one of the bleakest moments of the novel, which ends with men running along the riverbank, shooting at the two boys in the water, shouting “Kill them! Kill them!” Here Twain reflects upon the contrast around “adult” and “child” and how their broken or destructive families are contributing to the escape of their children. This is confirmed by the final shooting of the boys and by the idea that adults are failing their children and are denying them the future that they wish for. Twain here questions America and society’s ability to protect and guide their sons. For this reason, Huck and Jim decide to create an alternative domesticity on the raft. They break through the boundaries that society has set between white and black, “superior” and “inferior”, between the owner and the owned. At the same time though Jim never loses his sense of the more conventional family of wife and child that he has left behind and Huck remains deeply aware of the taboos he has broken. He knows that his relation with a runaway and a slave will make him despicable. And yet Jim and him learn to trust and depend on each other. This new cross-racial family makes them look marginal, hidden and abject but, in spite of that, they seem to accept and embrace that change that their guardians had refused to consider. There is no doubt that Huck is universally acknowledged as an or the American hero, but he still shares similarities with some of the world’s most famous literary characters. However, his closest affinity is with Oliver Twist. Dickens uses two different forms of techniques in the novel. The first is a feature that can be easily found in the majority of sentimental fiction which is to say, when the kind and good-hearted hero returns to his life rewarded with a life of comfort and luxury. The other consists in a revelation of a new truth at the end of the narration that changes the characters’ fate and the perception of the readers forever. Both boys own a particular place that will become a universal space: for Dickens this is the London of the industrial revolution, and for Twain, the mighty Mississippi River and the vast expanse of America’s wilderness. Twain share Dickens’ fierce abhorrence of the social injustice of his times.

Comparisons of Dickens and Twain by W.H. Auden (1953) and Hana Wirth Nesher (1986) have raised some useful points relative to these differences. Wirth Nesher, for example, takes Pip from *Great Expectations* and Huck a foils in considering “The Literary Orphan as National Hero”. Both boys are embarking on journeys deeply embedded in their national consciousness. “Pip wants to be a gentleman and Huck wants to break away from civilization altogether”⁵. In Auden’s terms, who analyzes more carefully the novel *Oliver Twist*, the two protagonists escape repressive domestic circumstances in search of personal freedom and identity. For the English hero “freedom” in effect means having enough money to live well in the metropolis and become eventually a member of the upper class. For the American one, “freedom” means sleeping under the open sky, free from urban institutions and social constraints. However, while Dickens’ conviction is that all men are connected with and responsible to one another, Huckleberry Finn learns from Twain the nihilist sentiment that freedom and society can never be other than antithetical. Moreover, where Twain departs from the English author and from other European writers of orphan stories is when he denies his hero a permanent home. For Twain, there will be no return to the starting point and his “prodigal sons” are destined to remain in a perpetual state of “homelessness”. On this note, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote “Huckleberry Finn took the first journey back. He was the first to look back at the republic from the perspective of the west. His eyes where the first eyes that ever looked at us objectively that were not eyes from overseas. There were mountains at the frontier but he wanted more than mountains to look at with his restive eyes- he wanted to find out about men and how they lived together. And because he turned back we have him forever”. The runaway boy has inevitably redefined and reshaped the landscape of American fiction as well as the idea of “home” and “homelessness”. The hero does not belong to his community and even the small towns that Jim and himself passed by on their raft acquire new meanings and identities. Most importantly the protagonist subverts the social conduct of his times when he becomes friend to an escaping slave. Huck is perceived filthy and demeaning for having entered this new social relationship, yet he seems to enjoy his transgression. However, it is worth noting that, although Twain revives and reinvents the hierarchy of social structures, it is difficult for the author to promote and imagine a satisfactory future for his heroes. Unlike Oliver

Twist, who experiences the different social classes of the austere Victorian society and succeeds in securing a place in the world as a gentleman, Huck to us seems to be stuck in the eternal dimension of boyhood. His escape is haunted by impossibility. The boys try to move away from a difficult present towards an imagined freedom in the future. Huck and Jim float even further into the slavery from which Jim is supposed to flee. The pleasant idea of a drift down the river seems to relieve them only on a temporary basis as they inevitable head for a violent past of slavery or to an eventual "freedom"- death by drowning in the Gulf of Mexico. Understandably, the best moments they share are not related to the idea of a future but to the idea of suspension when the boys are in the river mud, waiting out the heat of the day. Twain tends to find a solution to the problem of the future with the unlikely event that Huck and Jim meet again Tom Sawyer hundreds of miles away from where they last saw him, as they fetch up at what turns out to be Tom cousins' farm. This allows Twain to break the momentum towards dissolution and the possibility of death, as Tom reintroduces Huck and Jim to rules. In any case, Twain is still left with the difficult task of finding a plausible ending and a future for his heroes, a conclusion for these adventures. The author needs to compromise between regulation and dissolution. And in fact he seems to provide us with a solution when Huck says that he has "got to light out for a Territory ahead of the rest" because Aunt Polly is going to adopt him and "sivilize" him and he "can't stand it" because he's been there before (p.229). But as with the NOTICE at the beginning, this is a refusal of the norm. Huck is once again turning his back to the dimension that he already knows as he sees no possible future in that. On the contrary, he is directing his interest to "The Territory", that part of the land-mass that "belongs" to the nation but which has not been incorporated yet as one of the United States. Huck has been influenced by Tom's vision of "howling adventures among the Injuns". There is a sense here of the child seen as a young pioneer, who will pave the way for other free-spirited American children who will be in search for a wilderness on their own. His deserting "sivilization" is at the same time a way to reinforce the idea of a future seen as "freedom" and "independence". This ideal of freedom is the familiar ruse by which capitalist self-assertion of and within the USA becomes, for the protagonist, a moral, philosophical and human obligation. In fact, at the end of the two "boy books", *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the young hero is left in confusion once again. On one hand he has known and refused all the impositions of his society, on the other, he has tried to anticipate an idea of a fanciful future that will only reproduce what he has left behind. Twain was not satisfied with this ambiguous position and kept on trying, on and off, through the rest of his life to design a future for Huckleberry Finn. He began a sequel in 1884, *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among The Indians*. In this work, Twain tried to provide “the howling adventures” that he was aiming at in his previous novel. Here the Indians are shown to be deceitful, brutal and murderous. The author dropped this novel after having realised that such a violent story could not be appropriate for children.

Despite the many attacks made to the novel, the enduring strength of the story lies within the protagonist himself. His being parentless and his overcoming the rigid social structures make him a character of universal appeal.

The book also explores the child’s powers of reasoning, which was a central concern of Victorian child psychologists who deemed the child and “primitive” mind equivalent because they held an evolutionary perspective. The novel represents a significant change under many different aspects. As we know, the story is told by the first-person narrator Huck, who is thirteen or fourteen years old and he is the son of a local drunkard. Interestingly enough, we don’t find any description of his appearance in the book. Most importantly, we realize how important his voice is. As the protagonist child he is an example of an unreliable narrator. In Twain’s times it was not very common to tell the story from a child’s point of view. Shelley Fisher Fishkin notes that “before Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, no American author had entrusted his narrative to the voice of a simple untutored vernacular spoken-or, for that matter to child” (Was Huck Black? 13)

At the same time Huck is a model of adaptability. Unlike earlier young characters such as Alice who clearly fails to conform to the rules of Wonderland, Huck adapts himself, his stories and his behaviour to every town he visits. He represents the survival of the fittest in particular brutal Darwinian settings. His numerous lies are a result of his being mobile, restless and innocent. If we think about the episode when Jim suggests that Huck dresses up as a girl in order to obtain some information from a woman we learn that the boy fails to trick her. He makes several attempts during the novel to change his identity and transforms

himself into George Jackson in the Grangerfords household, an English servant for Mary Jane, and Tom Sawyer for Aunt Sally. He is continuously “born again” after passing through water, a symbol of his inconsistent nature. When with the widow, he grows “used to the widow’s ways”; when with Pap, “it warn’t long after that till I was used to being where I was and I liked it”. Huck is so adaptable that when he begins to live in the “fancy” Grangerfords home, he completely forgets about Jim. In what is perhaps the most humorous instance in which Twain hyperbolizes the child’s adaptability, Huck learns of the deceased Emmeline (the Grangerford’s daughter) and steps into her role, sketching graveyard poetry. But Twain expresses concern that adaptation and morality are at odds with each other. While adaptation is the principle of childhood and survival, it is also the characteristic of thieves and shysters, such as the King and the Duke. Huck introduces various characters to suggest how the child internalizes various role models during his development. The novel begins by positioning Huck between Tom, the other child hero, and Pap, a symbol for degraded and utterly “savage” nature. This gives the protagonist two father figures, Pap and Jim, who represent two distinct views of the natural world. In fact, brutal social environments contrasts Huck’s romantic visions. Twain offers his hero an alternative reality with Jim who represents an alternative parent and model of a kinder natural world, a romantic nature-reader standing apart from the oppressing savage societies on land.

The most canonical US text, although is about a child, and whatever lessons it sets out to give, cannot decide upon the future as the child. Twain was indeed wary of the American future and became incredibly taken with the idea that no future was better than anything else. Twain cannot imagine his protagonist as becoming fully grown up. Huck must rebel and be alienated in order to be heroic in a corrupted society. His not wanting to be adopted indicates his refusal to conform to norms of family life and social expectation. There is, however, an important aspect that needs to be considered. In the later works of the author, we notice that he shifts from an earlier playful rejection of “civilization” as motherly haunts against whom boys must rebel, to a more serious preoccupation of the American experiment, where society is often seem corrupted or dysfunctional. He set out to have

America for the child but at the same time we leave his boys in need of a continued rescue. This is why *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ends the way it does; Twain cannot imagine Jim free, he cannot imagine Huck having a future or being an adult. At the end of Huck's book, there is no actual department for college, for the business of the world and, ultimately, for manhood, as in the books of Dickens. Huck Finn ends his novel in the present tense, an immensely daring decision on Twain's part; Huck does not grow up and look back nostalgically at his boyhood. There is a parallelism in the novel between the innocent voice of the protagonist and the more adult and distanced perspective of the author within the novel. One of the greatest elements of appeal is the double point of view; the adult Twain who accompanies and even becomes lost in the idyll of his own parable and in his adventures but at the same time observes him with awareness and maturity. However, life as an adult is not an option for the author that concludes his novel with his protagonist "lighting out" for the Territory, that is to say, for the unknown. Therefore, instead of becoming like the rest of the community, he prefers abandoning it in order to be himself or gain the liberty of self. The River here occupies a significant and highly symbolical role. For both Huck and Jim the River represents freedom. For the protagonist the Mississippi is an escape from a world full of obligations and constraints. For Jim, similarly, it is a route to liberty, as the river is the route he has to travel to reach Cairo and accomplish the ultimate thing a slave can wish for, freedom. "We judged that three nights more would fetch us to Cairo, at the bottom of Illinois, where the Ohio river comes in, and that was what we was after. We would sell the raft and get on a steamboat and go way up the Ohio amongst the free states, and then be out of trouble" (Twain 135). Nevertheless, there is an important distinction; Huck already feels free from confinement while staying on the river. As soon as he has to interact with society he has to adapt to its limitations and therefore he will never be truly free on land. For that reason we may argue that the Mississippi symbolizes freedom to an even greater extent to Huck than for Jim, primarily since the river to the slave is portrayed as the journey to freedom but does not represent liberty in itself.

However, as we know, the river is also associated with danger. Using the rivers as a route to independence can be perceived as gambling since one does not always succeed despite taking a risk, which is represented by what Huck and Jim experienced on their journey.

However, the image that Harriet Beecher Stowe portrays when one does not manage to find his liberty through the rivers is that one lives happily ever after, which was exactly what Eliza, Harry and George experienced in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In this novel the river is also used as a metaphor for something that separates heaven from hell. Hell for the reason that slaves such as George and Eliza were treated extremely bad by their masters and for those slaves who were situated down the river. The Ohio River therefore functioned as their route to heaven and freedom, just as the Mississippi did for Jim. The River is also seen as a heaven as when Huck and Jim are on the raft it is perceived as a home and a relaxing setting, which is exactly what both of them are wishing for: "It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed, only a little kind of a low chuckle. We had mighty good weather, as a general thing, and nothing ever happened to us at all, that night, nor the next, nor the next". (Twain 109) This quote indicates how empowering this natural element becomes for the protagonists; they are concerned that anyone would notice or catch them and generally, both of them wish to be nowhere else.

In addition to that, the river is where the conclusion of the novel takes place and in this moment we wonder what the real interpretation of freedom is.

The river is clearly a synonym of freedom. Freedom is always seen as one of America's abiding subjects as well as one of its deepest problems. Here there is a large gap between the country 's large promises and its less-than-perfect practice. Again Twain decides to leave the future on Huck voluntarily undefined, blurry or maybe enlightened by the discovery of the Territory. We may not predict what perils or greater adventures await for Huck beyond the Mississippi. At the same time, we seem not to worry excessively about him as for us he chooses to be the way he is a lonely son with no borders, escaping from trouble and "sivilization", enshrined in the raft heaven and in the freedom of the river, whatever the cost may be...

Notes

¹ Richard Stengel, "The Mark of Twain", Time 3 (July 2008).

² Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977) pp.125 6-

³ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.24 (p.4)

⁴ Edwin H. Cady, *The Light of Common Day: Realism in American Fiction* (Bloomington Indiana UP, 1971)101, 118.

⁵ Entminger, Betina. *Come Back to the Raft Ag'in*, Ed Genry. The Southern Literary Journal, Volume 40, Number 1, Fall 2007. 98-113.

CHAPTER 4

THOSE LONE RANGERS FIST FIGHTING ON EARTH: YOUNG REBELS IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S EARLY FICTION.

In the second chapter of my thesis I analyze boyhood in Sherman Alexie's collection short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and explore the cultural background and context where the young male heroes live and express themselves. The writings of the Native American author present a fusion of historical sensibilities and grim realism of contemporary Indian life on the Spokane Reservation. With the wide imagery of Crazy Horse, basketball, cavalry charges, alcohol abuse and rock and roll, the writer depicts the daily challenges and resistance that young people living there witness and experience.

There are many similarities with other classic boyhoods of American literature. Just like Huckleberry Finn, the young male Indian heroes portrayed are often victims of neglect, sons of alcoholic fathers and expressions of denied opportunities but, unlike the canonic runaway of the Mississippi river, these boys long for an escape from a suffocating context in order to be part of a more clement and promising one. Being an Indian means dealing with history, with tradition and veering against a mainstream culture that tends to oppress.

The nature of the escape that these Indian young men wish to pursue is quite different from Huck's. Huck runs away from a society where he does not find any possible dimension for himself. On the contrary, the various Juniors runaway from the limited home context of the Reservation and hope, at least partly, to leave the burden of colonization behind and find their place in the urban, white dominant society.

We can agree that the experiences of the boys studied are diametrically opposed, although there are many features that make them quite similar models of American young male heroes; they are lonely, they are marginalized, they are rebels.

In fact, much of Alexie's fiction takes place on the Spokane Indian Reservation where he was born and raised, and he uses recurring characters like the isolated storyteller, Thomas

Builds-the-Fire, and the violent and troubled Victor. In that sense, he can be compared to William Faulkner, focusing upon a small geographical location to explore larger issues and themes. The small Spokane Reservation is an inexhaustible source of literary inspiration for the writer. As Alexie himself explains, “Every theme, every story, every tragedy that exists in literature takes place in my small community. Hamlet takes place on my reservation daily. King Lear takes place on my reservation daily. It’s a powerful place. I’m never going to run out of stories”.¹

After the 1992 publication of *The Business of Fancydancing* several critics hailed the author as an important new voice in Native American literature. Later works, in particular *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), garnered Alexie both critical and mainstream success. Stephen F. Evans points out, “Much of the praise bestowed on Alexie focuses on the author’s unflinching bold depiction of the dysfunctional nature of contemporary reservation life and the fragmented, often alienated “bicultural” characters who daily confront the white civilization that encaptives their world- physically, historically, spiritually and psychologically”. Indians on reservations have not literally vanished from the minds of American society.

Furthermore, Alexie explains that one of his primary goals is to involve Indian children, whom he believes to be influenced by a white-dominated culture. Such kids, that become the main characters of his stories, have experienced both cultures and are suspended between the memories of their parents about a traumatic past and the world beyond the reservation, made of a white dominant community but full of opportunities. This is why he often uses many references from films, shows, television and music in order to hold the attention of the young public on the reservation. In his novels and short stories Alexie questions and criticizes the stereotypes of Indian as nature-loving noble savages and he prefers to concentrate his attention on a Native American literature that concerns the daily lives of the Indians.

There are so many differences between Native American fiction and European or American fiction .William Bevis claims that such canonic Western novels as *Moby-Dick*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Great Gatsby* contain plot based upon leaving, escape or discovery, in which “the individual advances, sometimes at all

costs, with little or no regard for family, society, past or place. The individual is the ultimate reality, hence individual consciousness in the medium, repository, and arbiter of knowledge". In contrast to the typical Western plot, Bevis argues that in a typical Native American work, the protagonist "recoils from a White world in which the mobile Indian individuals finds no meaning and as if by instinct, comes home...This "homing" cannot be judged by white standards of individuality; it must be read in a tribal context".²

As a matter of fact, one of the main challenges of contemporary Indian writers is to find themselves caught between mainstream American life and reservation life. The reservation is always depicted as a negative place where hardly any future will be possible for his young male heroes.

As Alexie states, "Reservations were created by white people for the Native Americans/Indians to live on and they were plots of land that nobody wanted and were just God-awful. White people didn't want the land and they had to move them somewhere so they chose the worst land they could find and gave it to the Indians. They did not care about them and still don't do in a way and pretty much just wanted them dead. They could not do much with the land so staying alive was very hard. The Indians couldn't just up and leave, they had no where to go, no energy to do so, and the fear of the white people killing them forced them to stay and put where they where allowed". Even one of the characters from his most recent novel tells Junior "If you stay on this rez... they are going to kill you. We are all going to kill you. You are going to find more and more hope the farther and farther you walk away from this sad, sad reservation". (67) This clearly confirms that the symbolic setting is a place where nothing good can presumably happen. There are no dreams, no ambition, no motivation of any kind and the people who live there are sad, lonely, isolated and usually end up dying, mostly from alcohol. This makes the reservation like a death camp. Junior finally realizes it when he says "reservations were meant to be prisons... Indians were supposed to move on reservations and die. We were supposed to disappear". The challenge is to contrast that idea, that image promoted by films, television, showing Indians as vanishing savages whose only choices were complete annihilation or complete assimilation. It seems as though there is no room for the contemporary Indian in the mainstream entertainment. Alexie with his independent, rebellious spirit is sometimes at

odds with his use of ethnic categories. He criticizes stereotypes and implicates what he calls “The corn-pollen, four directions, eagle-feathered school of Native literature”. This vision, in his own words, has nothing to do with the day to day lives of the Indians. He also aims at rewriting dominant American history which barely acknowledges the violent colonization and massacres by European settlers. To do so would severely damage American national identity and pride. “If people start dealing with Indian culture and Indian people truthfully in this country”, he argues “We are going to start dealing with the genocide that happened here. In order to start dealing truthfully with our cultures, they have to start dealing truthfully with the great sin, the original sin of this country, and that’s not going to happen”. It is important to recognize that Indians are not only indigenous to North America and a colonized people, but that they have been stereotyped by Europeans from their first settlements in early seventeenth century. As Andrew Macdonald explains, “Since the first encounters of pre-colonial times, Europeans have shaped, changed, and distorted the indigenous people to serve white people’s needs. The word “Indian” is a conflation of hundreds of tribes, languages and cultures into one emblematic figure: the other, the Alien, the generalized Non - European”.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven begins with “Every Little Hurricane”, in which the reservation boys display self and mutually destructive tendencies. Since the incipit we cannot help but noticing that pretty much everyone is involved in a fight; the two brothers Arnold and Adolph, Victor’s uncles and the two Indians at the party. The young heroes are natural witnesses of conflict and confrontational behavior. This “hurricane” is actually a tribal New Years’ Eve party. The storm metaphor suggests that what previously existed on the reservation has been wiped out for the present generation. The boys experiencing such transition become inevitably afflicted by an ongoing cultural assault and at the end of the twentieth century have to adopt different strategies from the previous generations. Victor imagines “that his father’s tears could have been frozen solid in the severe winters and shattered when hit the floor”. Alexie describes his heroes as pure witnesses and nothing else: “Witnesses. They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale. Victor’s uncles were in the midst of a misdemeanor that would remain one even if somebody was to die. One

Indian killing another did not create a special kind of storm. The little kind of hurricane was generic. It didn't even deserve a name". This sense of passivity is still very present in the novel as failure and deprived environments are mainly where the Indian boys have grown up. Yet, the author is particularly interested in giving the new generation a diverse, innovative voice or simply an escape from where their fathers, uncles or guardians have come from.

As we progress in the narration we come across a series of images portraying unsettled and broken families. The little hurricanes taking place in each one of the protagonists can be internalized or repressed, such as when Victor's father drinks vodka on an empty stomach to distill his personal tempest of anger and dissatisfaction. The storm moves from Indian to Indian at the party and each one of them gives a painful, specific memory about their past. Victor's father remembers when he and his father were spat upon by whites and Victor's mother recalls how "The Indian Health Service doctor sterilized her moments after Victor was born". Similarly, the boy wonders if the doctors "could fix the broken nose and sprained ankles?" Here Alexie reveals how eternal, often racist acts or attitudes of non-Natives can produce internal, bottled up rage that can lead to violence. Yet, he sees that as an ironic product of this deep rage and disappointment. This repressed animosity also forges strong bonds between family members. In fact, at the conclusion of the first short story, once the hurricane has descended on the reservation, Victor's uncles give up the fight and walk back into the house forgiving each other on New Year's Eve party. While Alexie points out that this bond is stronger than most anything, he also writes "It's the same bond that causes so much pain". These boys like Huck, Oliver and their literary predecessors, have witnessed and seen a lot of violence and privation in their lives. They are surrounded by a world dominated by change and disillusion and they struggle to find guidance and support from their parents. Just like Huck with Pap, Victor grows up lacking a strong role model and even when he is near his two parents he realizes "there was enough hunger in both, enough movement, enough geography and history, enough of everything to destroy the reservation and leave only random debris and broken furniture". With this ending, the author suggests that ultimately Indians on the reservation are, in many ways, the greater danger to themselves.

In the second short story of the collection, "A Drug called Tradition" Victor's friends are introduced to the readers: Thomas and Junior. The young boys are sadly used to their drunken families and to their destructive and dysfunctional ways. At the beginning they are in Thomas's house and although there is no food in the refrigerator, they have plenty of liquor. Thomas is throwing a party to celebrate the money that he was compensated from the Washington Water Power, but after he leaves with Junior to go and try "some new drugs" at Benjamin Lake to hopefully experience visions. The drug is associated to the theme of visions, pipe-dreams that give these oppressed people a form of solace. Before their venture, Victor bargains with Thomas not to tell any stories until they are under the influence of drugs. Here Alexie writes to convey how the Native American past may be so difficult for them to accept, that they have to be under the influence of drugs to manage to do so. This relates to the alcohol dependency portrayed in this book, and shows how numerous characters find their only means to get through their problems in drinking. Like many other characters, Victor and Junior cannot handle the pain and frustration of their cultural background, as symbolized through Thomas's stories; therefore they must intoxicate themselves to relieve themselves from the animosity of their past. Victor dreams of becoming an outstanding guitarist and Junior of stealing horses. This one is a vision of Thomas that contrasts to the vision of him now. In fact, he is young, awkward and an outcast in the present, while the Thomas of Junior's dream is strong and powerful and takes us back in the past, to a tribal context. Throughout the book the boys long to connect with what their culture and heritage was before it was decimated by white people. Even in their visions, they are unable to escape the loss of their tradition.

In particular, in the story Alexie reflects upon the modern day friction between Native American and Western culture. The writer has clearly imbued his work with contemporary American society and reservation life. However, there is always constant critique towards the deceptive treatment of Indians by the whites and the government of the United States. But even at the outset, the story presents an extremely valuable ambiguity: the narrator admits that when Indians receive money from these American corporations, his people "can never tell whether their ancestors are laughing at the Indians or at the whites".(387) Hence, Victor questions himself whether their ancestors are applauding them for financially

revengeing their historical mistreatment or, on the contrary, if they are laughing at them for accepting such passive methods of profit that actually look back to the past and not to the future.

In the end, Alexie reveals that he embraces a more pragmatic approach to the continuous contrast between the Native American tradition and the Western culture. Native Americans must rehabilitate in order to accept the hybridity in which they live. In fact in the three short stories of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* "A Drug Called Tradition," "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," and "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire," the author depicts the Native American experience with their own legacy through Thomas Builds-the-Fire.

Thomas as well keeps on reappearing in other writings, including in "This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona", a story that would later on become the blueprint for the film "Smoke Signals". Once again, we find Victor who, after losing his job, discovers that his father has died in Phoenix and he plans to go there to claim from his meagre inheritance. He asks Thomas to accompany him. In the course of the journey, some episodes in the earlier life of the two boys are recounted, and their friendship is reborn. Thomas, a visionary storyteller and link to traditional Indian ways, suggests throwing Victor's father's ashes in the Spokane River so that he can "rise like a salmon and find his way home." Through Thomas's character, the author demonstrates how people with imaginative abilities are often ostracized on the reservation. While waiting in line at the Trading post, Victor witnesses Thomas talking to himself and describing himself as "a storyteller that nobody wanted to listen to. That's like being a dentist in a town where everyone has false teeth,". (61) Although this seems like a mere comparison, Alexie uses this dentist metaphor to convey a much more complex depiction of false origin - like how many Native Americans are assimilated and accept white history as their own. Teeth have roots and these roots symbolize one's origin. The root, the place from which you are initially derived, your cultural history, will stay with you the way teeth do. Teeth are permanent parts of your body and, like origins, they can still identify a person even after death. Thomas's stories reinforce a Native American's origin and cultural roots the way a dentist does literally. A dentist cannot strengthen or fix one's teeth if they are fake, in the same way that Thomas

cannot reinforce a false past that Native Americans have used to replace their own. These "fake teeth" represent how Native Americans set aside their own true cultural history and, through assimilation, have procured the white culture and their history. The new culture Native Americans took on, replaced their old roots, in the sense of teeth and origin. If everyone in the town has a fake origin, Thomas is unable to reinforce his culture's history and keep it alive.

Alexie keeps on presenting Thomas and his mystical tendencies which led him to jump off the roof of a tribal school because he thought he could fly. Even though he broke his leg, the other kids admired him for his courage during his flight attempt. Telling stories also allows him to maintain his heritage. To some extent, the author criticizes Thomas's romantic naïveté as his telling stories does not any good as they have no real audience anymore. Stories have lost their appeal (or maybe not). In this one, Victor reminisces about his childhood with his mate, like when they are ten years old and go to see fireworks together. These happy memories portray how Victor and his people were once content and acceptant of their culture - symbolized by Thomas – but, as they get older, they begin to ignore it. The hurricanes and its storm metaphor suggest that what previously existed on the reservation has been wiped out for the current generation. Afflicted by ongoing cultural assault, this one at the end of the twentieth century has to adopt different strategies from previous ones. In another memory, Victor recalls being a teenager and it had been long since stopped being friends [with Thomas]," (65) when he got drunk and beat up Thomas for no reason at all," (65). His intoxication and violence against Thomas evokes, especially when growing up, the Native American's constant struggle with their own culture and their desperate attempts to destroy it. Although Thomas must continually suffer, literally and emotionally, in order to save his people and tradition, he persists and survives through "the beating that might have gone on until Thomas was dead," (65). His surviving this instance conveys a kind of indestructibility. Even when a culture is battered and shunned by its own people, it keeps on staying alive like Thomas.

Symbolically, Thomas is the savior of his people just like Jesus was the savior for his people. His triumph over his neglect and abuse are his resurrection, and his self-sacrifice to save his own culture from dying. In another memory, Victor recalls getting stuck in an

underground wasp nest and "he might have died there, stung a thousand times," (68) if Thomas had not been watching over him and come to his rescue. In the way that Jesus watches over his people, Thomas watches over Victor, and symbolically over his whole people. Even when they lose faith in Thomas and his stories, he tries to tell them to keep culture alive. In the Bible, Jesus offers forgiveness to those who have sinned, and even when Native Americans sin against their own culture, Thomas forgives them and does not give up.

Throughout the novel Alexie portrays and reinvents that world of unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, diabetes and the uncertain future and addresses such problems throughout the male young characters that appear in the collection of short stories. Also, the real troubles of alcohol abuse and suicide receive further attention through the subsequent narrative concerning basketball, which acts as a tragicomic metaphor. In such a context, basketball assumes ethical importance. According to Peter Donahue, this sport has an important "reshaping influence" that promotes "healing qualities" by creating "Indian identity, pride and resistance". It becomes a myth when the past seems inaccessible, something that binds together the tribe and makes survival through irony possible. "I laughed" says Victor "Because it was the right thing today". According to Mikhail Bakhtin subversive humor undermines stereotype: "Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning. One of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole. The world is seen a new, no less profoundly than when seen from the serious point of view. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only through laughter".

For Victor, laughing may also be the only possible solution. "It's hard to be optimistic on the *rez*. When a glass sits on a table here, people don't wonder if it's a half filled or half empty. "They just hope it's a good beer". Through his humour, Alexie makes it possible for us to relate to serious social context in which his boys grow up experiencing a deprived and disadvantaged life. Certainly, humor is one of the most powerful weapons that can potentially save these kids from the same destiny of their fathers. However, Alexie's young heroes are not simply condemned forever to be passive or marginal figures who remain stuck in a fictional world or limited dimension. These will progressively abandon that landscape of suffering that the author calls "an on-going colonialism".

Despite the fact that most of the Reservation Tribal members are tormented by collective memories of a genocidal past, of cavalry approved hangings, massacres and smallpox infections, the heroes of the short stories attempt to subvert these legacies to make room for new ones. They dream of Jimi Hendrix, of celebrating the Fourth of July as any other citizen of the United States, of moving to the big cities and of studying in well known Universities. Just like Huckleberry Finn, they can be considered runaways. They escape the oppressive context to establish themselves in the dynamic urban world. While in Alexie's early fiction the reservation is a geographical space of borders and confinement, in his more recent works, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (2003), it changes its ontology and becomes a mental and emotional territory. In addition to that, the writer implies that television-watching is a primary source of community contact for urban Indians, and "cable television reservation" suggests that the place is commercialized, conditioned and influenced by mass-produced culture. However, he proposes that evading and imagining alternatives to the dominant culture's narrative of conquest is a powerful strategy and weapon. This may not change the present, but could offer other possibilities where Native Americans will write a different future. Imagination is one part of the equation for survival.

In "Family Portrait", the narrator opens the story with "The television was always loud, too loud, until every conversation was distorted, fragmented". He makes examples of how generic dialogues, from police dramas to science fiction begin to inform them of the world of the other people. Television contributes to dissolving Native Americans' memory by displacing them from both their community and the worldview. It alienates the narrator from his daily reality and helps people switch off from the outside world.

In an interview, the author says that this ontological change is the result of his own "expanded worldview. "During the course of his writing career, Alexie explains, he has moved from what he calls a fundamental world-view which earlier made him "so focused on Indian identity that didn't look at the details," to what he hopes will be "the triumph of the ordinary." His writing has thus shifted in emphasis from angry protests to evocations of love and empathy.

In fact, all the characters, from Victor to Thomas-Builds-the-Fire and Father Arnold, long for magic in their lives and contribute to denying that Native American Reservation life is all about illness and despair. On the contrary, for them life is also capable of happiness and celebration. Even if “nobody believed in anything on the Reservation”, Alexie says of Thomas “he wanted a story to heal the wounds, but he knew that his stories never healed anything”. He stays a witness in a quiet a powerful way and, like Alexie, he wants “the songs, the stories to save everyone”.

The writer offers an equation for the boys living on the Reservation “Survival = Anger X Imagination”. This latter one is the only real weapon in such scenario. John and Carl Bellante questioned Sherman Alexie about that correspondence in an interview conducted for Bloomsbury Review and he responded, “Exactly what my attitude toward life is.” When the brothers Bellante asked what “precisely” about white culture angered him, Alexie replied “Pretty much everything patriarchal. We’ve resisted assimilation in many ways, but I know we’ve assimilated into sexism and misogyny. Women are the creators. We get in trouble when we try to deny that”.

There is a positive rage about the author in most of his works. He is a “polemicist”, a “warrior” who explores how the past has failed the Indians and how the future may be kinder and rosier for them. When asked by the same brothers “Do you ever worry about anger coming as a negative force?” he has cited Gandhi and reported that anger can indeed be a positive force. “Anger without hope, anger without love, or anger without compassion are all consuming. That’s not my kind of anger. Mine is very specific and directed”.

Most boys and protagonists are angry, are sad, feel oppressed, often disappointed in their lives but we might notice that a great part of these stories have “a positive ending”, even if almost always in the mode of Chekhov’s “laughter through tears”. Alexie succeeds in offering an alternative to the traditionally bleak or highly pessimistic endings in Native American fiction. More specifically, I am referring to N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony* and James Welch’s *The Death of Jim Loney*. In all of these, despite a clear final indication of hope, redemption and happiness, it is still possible to infer that the fate of Indians involves inevitably pain, sufferings and, ultimately, death. Of course, not all of Alexie’s stories are healing, but we certainly perceive his effort to

promote a different image of his characters. Part of what distinguished his fiction is that his young heroes do not fall into neither of the most common stereotypes that Whites have fabricated: Noble Savage and Barfly. As a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene who grew up on the reservation of Wellpinit, Washington, he says in an interview that there he felt himself an "outsider" while experiencing a white dominant context. Such feelings will be particularly poignant in his most recent novels such as *Flight* or *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, where the author explores more intensively the relationship between the Native and the WASP American world.

When it comes to Indians and their fiction, it is essential to emphasize how they are represented and most importantly, who is representing them. A significant moment in this sense has been the release of the film *Smoke Signals* in 1998 which has been a transformative event in the history of Indigenous media in the United States. The film has been adapted from the short story *This is What Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*. *Smoke Signals* was funny, smart, tragic and pedagogical at the same time and became the first Native film to reach a wide audience in North America. Some viewers were astonished and delighted to see a respectful story that resonated with their personal experiences while others were surprised to find themselves into an unfamiliar world that seemed meaningful and compelling. For cultural outsiders and insiders, and everyone in between, the movie represented a refreshingly new vision on contemporary life, a very different perspective from the extremes of romanticism or outright demonization that distorted mass media culture throughout the twentieth century.

We can certainly agree that one of the most present characters is Victor Joseph, who dominates the stories in *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and seems most willing to make generalizations about the way Indians think and act. "When Indians make lots of money from corporations that way, we can hear ancestors laughing in the trees". (13) Generally, however, Victor's view of things can be strident at times and becomes not narrowly ethnocentric, for example, when he says "But we can never tell whether they are laughing at the Indians or the whites. I think they're laughing pretty much at everybody". In most parts, "laughing pretty much at everybody" is what Alexie does most often in his fiction. Another moment when Victor acts as a spokesman of the Indians is when he says in

A Drug called Tradition “There is an old Indian poet who said that Indians can reside in the city, but they never live there. That’s as close to truth as any of us can get”. (187)

On the other hand, Thomas embodies the inspired imagination and he is inevitably regarded as the “strange” or “mad “by the others in the community. His story involves most characters in the present, deciding to “be real Indians”, and seeking their own vision of past and present. In the same short story Thomas yells something that Junior swears was “not to slow dance with out skeletons”. “Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you...What you have to do is keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeleton”. (21-22)

Here, we are informed that to Indians, all time is “now”. Alexie promotes a different image and he points out that all the three protagonists do not conform to the stereotype of being drinkers. In fact, in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* both Junior and Victor frequently reach for a Diet-Pepsi instead and tend to combat the long gone mythology of the Noble Savage and, just like Thomas, they will keep on telling stories that no one wants to hear. These boys live with the theme of remembrance and even when tribal memory is repressed, they still have to reconstruct the past and their own identity while resisting the dominant culture. Alexie’s protagonists rebel against the “official story” and explore the relationship of history and memory to the present. In a way they strive to reshape their own “official story”. History remains in Wellpinit and beyond, the long nightmare from which our heroes are struggling to awaken. “It is *now*. Three Indian boys are drinking Diet Pepsi and talking out by Benjamin Lake...The Indian boys have decided to be real Indians tonight...The boys sit by the fire and breathe, their visions arrive. They are all carried away to the past, to the moment before any of them took their first drink of alcohol. The boy Thomas throws the beer he is offered into the garbage. The boy Junior throws his whiskey through a window. The boy Victor spills his vodka down the drain. Then the boys sing. They sing and dance and drum. They steal horses. I can see them. *They steal horses.*” When Thomas finishes his story, Victor asks “You don’t really believe that shit?” and the answer is “Don’t need to believe anything. It just is”. In this passage we can notice the contrast between story and vision and the regenerative power of tradition and Ghost

Dances. The boys give up alcohol and go on with their decision of becoming real Indians, but in the way they see themselves, which acknowledges full potential for transformation. It is truthfully change that affects the life and the future of these young heroes. Those are the ones who will abandon that legacy that obligates and condemns the Indians to feel victims no matter what.

These boys will remember their life on the reservation but will also leave it for nobler purposes and will go places. They will keep on dancing, along with their many ghosts and shadows, will keep on moving, studying and will embrace social mobility. They are used to striving and struggling in the great big world and have witnessed many sufferings. At some point, they will speak English instead of Salish, possibly marry white girls or drink Diet Pepsi instead of vodka.

Certainly, all the Juniors, the young prophets like Thomas builds-the-fire and Victors will be witnesses of great changes for their people and will learn to be active participants of the greatly diversified American society, but just like their glorious tribal warriors and protective ancestors will keep on fist fighting from time to time here on earth as in heaven.

Notes

¹ Quoted in Joel McNally, "Sherman Alexie", *Writer* 114, no. (June 2001):30.

² Bevis, "Native American Novels". 28

CHAPTER 5

FLIGHT ATTEMPTS: JUNIORS GET THEIR WINGS

In 2007, Sherman Alexie won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature for his novel *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Earlier the same year, he also published *Flight*. Even if *Flight* was not specifically identified as young adult fiction, it is a bildungsroman as well. Both books, Alexie's first novels since *Indian Killer* in 1996, address themes he has explored throughout his literary career: absent or imperfect fathers, fathers and sons, alcohol and alcoholism, colonialism, history, notions of masculinity, love and family and the search for identity.

There is a similarity between these two works; the *Diary* has earned the top spot in 2014 report from the American Library Association "as the most banned or challenged book" due to its references to the sexual sphere and *Flight*, quite similarly, depicts an intended mass shooting and references child sexual abuse too. Both books are set in the Washington State and focus on American Indian young men and offer, as Jan Johnson observes, "empathy, compassion and forgiveness as a possible way out of suffering and grief" (224-225). There is another characteristic that connects the two protagonists: loneliness. This feeling impacts on the lives of the teenagers enormously. In the *Diary*, Arnold's decision to continue his education off the reservation makes inevitably isolate the child both at home and in the white world. For Zits, the self named hero of *Flight*, his path to alleviate his isolation is particularly turbulent as he has spent most of his life in foster homes where he has often been exposed to physical and sexual abuse.

Like the protagonists of *Indian Killer*, the main character in *Flight* is a young emotionally wounded male Indian orphan adopted into a white family. But in spite of a similar start, the two novels create very different visions of redemption for their heroes. Alexie has said that he has seen *Flight* as his answer to *Indian Killer*'s nihilistic and pessimistic vision. While

his works have frequently attempted to narrate historical traumas and the crisis of identity, *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* implicitly explore the possibilities for healing the tragic legacy of genocide and colonialism in ways no earlier novel has. In both stories empathy, compassion and forgiveness mark possible way.

The aim of this is to analyze the evolution of the young male Indian heroes in an urban context, and to explore how they are striving to be accepted by the white dominant society.

In *The Modern Age: Turn-of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention*

of Adolescence, Kent Baxter proposes that constructing adolescents as people who could still be “shaped and (re)formed” (37) links late nineteenth-century educational reform, the creation of juvenile courts, Richard Henry Pratt’s establishment of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879, and the transformation of Ernest Thompson Seton’s Woodcraft Indians into Lord Robert Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts. Showing in numerous ways how social evolutionary theories connected adolescence and Native Americans, even as they allowed only the white adolescent to “evolve” beyond “savagery” (50), he notes how this produced a ‘crisis of identity’ in the assimilated Native American” (74). Baxter’s analysis is useful in two ways: first, it foregrounds how Pratt and the history of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, as represented in children’s books such as Ann Rinaldi’s *My Heart Is on the Ground*, serve as an intertext to *The Absolutely True Diary*.²⁰ Second, it suggests why Alexie’s young adult novel does not exactly fit the theory of adolescent literature proposed by Roberta Seelinger Trites.²¹ In numerous interviews, Alexie has stated that *The Absolutely True Diary*, which began as a story in a family memoir, is a fictionalization of his experiences in his first year at Reardan (“Interview”). Among the many benefits of shifting from memoir to novel is an enlargement of the narrative’s focus; the autobiographical story of one individual expands to become potentially the story of many. As Junior informs his readers, his name is common not on just his reservation, but any reservation in the United States: “Shout, ‘Hey, Junior!’ and seventeen guys will turn around. And three women”. (60) In addition, what readers might regard as unbelievable in a memoir, they may be more willing to accept as a fictional premise.

Bradford categorizes *The Absolute True Diary of a Part Time Indian* a mainstream novel that says little new. This is not surprising given her premise “When books by minority authors find white audiences, this is generally because they are not too different”.

Bradford acknowledges that the book has something different that is “not too different”-but while she refers to the novel as a postcolonial text, she also writes that it addresses “a conventional topic, the identity formation of its adolescent protagonist”. Although Bradford says that Alexie’s novel tracks Junior’s formation as an Indian subject who expresses his identity in “unconventional ways” (46), she ultimately places this “unconventional” expression of identity within a “conventional” topic.

Allison Porzio recommends that English teachers use books such as *The Absolute True Diary of a Part Time Indian* in order to “teach critical literacy; a great skill to prepare students for standardized testing and for life” (31). The scholar paraphrases the novel by describing Junior as “the low man on the metaphorical totem pole”. (32)

Porzio also reflects on the concept of race, which she sees as an issue that concerns only non-whites. Not only the scholar imagines Alexie’s readers as whites but she also marginalizes Alexie’s Indian identity, writing that the book is by “a gifted American author who also happens to be Indian”. (35)

But being an Indian is not a minor and accidental characteristic for either Alexie (Spokane/Coeur D’Alene) or Junior (Spokane); it is a primary tribal identity even when, at the novel’s conclusion, Junior has “the huge realization” that his survival is inseparable from his recognition of his multiple tribal identities. In the beginning of the novel, Junior dreams of “escaping the reservation”(6) but, as Alexie has noted about his own life, such escape is more physical than psychological.⁸ Even Junior’s physical escape is qualified by the novel’s ending, when on the reservation, he remembers stories about Turtle Lake: “ I didn’t exactly believe in the giant turtle myth...but I am still an Indian”.

In *Flight* we find, once again, a young demoralized Native American who attempts to mix with the Anglo-American popular culture. The book is rich in literary references to the great classics of American literature. In fact the novel opens with “Call me Zits”. With this infamous nickname, the protagonist unveils his young age and all the daily challenges of

adolescence. Acne is certainly one of those. He also informs us of his mixed heritage; an Irish mother and an absent Indian father. The sense of belonging to more than one culture inevitably highlights that state of displacement that is so present in these young men. The boy insists that his “real name is not important” and instead presents his precarious identity of adolescent by focusing on a bodily affliction. The problem of identity is extremely poignant in both novels and so is the whole idea of authenticity- “How Indian are you?” is a recurring theme in all the three novels. *Flight* explores the challenges and the daily battles as an adolescent and his struggle to truly define who he is. Zits has been engaged in an ongoing war with a world that threatens his existence at every turn. In his brief life, he has been in twenty foster homes and twenty-two schools. Adults, who were supposed to protect and help him, fail him repeatedly. The vulnerable child once known as Michael becomes Zits and, for nine years, he learns little more than how to survive. From the age of six, the boy endures unimaginable sufferings that cause him to retreat within himself, the only space where he can exert limited control. And his self imposed nickname, “Zits”, describes the current state of his skin’s condition and the boy’s deepened isolation. In fact, by choosing acne as the main physical feature of his young hero, Alexie expresses two different purposes; on one hand acne represents a universal and problematic teenage annoyance while on the other, the protagonist lets us know that his face is red and this is a clear reference to the typical skin undertone of Native Americans. In fact, the portrayal of the orphaned fifteen-year old mixed blood protagonist seems to perpetuate the tragic or vanishing Indian heritage and the on-going literary erasure of Native subjects, which has a long history. The novel makes a powerful statement about Native people in Young Adult fiction and U.S. culture more broadly by presenting Zits’ unwillingness to vanish forever. This shift represents what theorist Gerald Vizenor terms “survivance”, an idea vastly expressed in Native American “resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry” (“Aesthetics”¹¹). These heroes express their ability to be independent from constraining authorities, struggle against oppressors and to eventually liberate themselves. There are many protagonists in recent Young Adult Fiction such as Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* (2008) to Thomas in *The Maze Runner* (2009), attempt to defy, change or simply survive their circumstances. However, to Native

Americans characters this does not simply mean coping and fighting against oppression, but it can mean enduring under ongoing strain and privation. More than simply survival, survivance requires action so that Native American heroes can become effective agents in their own lives. We must understand how difficult it is for Zits as a lonely, mixed blood teenager, to step away from that legacy of tragedy and victimry and move into the modern world.

When it comes to defining his origins, his behavior is quite ambiguous as well; we know that the problem of acne is quite common amongst teenagers of any background but at the same time, Zits wonders if his blemished face is caused by him being half-Indian. His mixed heritage has left the boy unsure as how to be “a real Indian”. At the beginning of the novel, Zits openly admits “Everything I know about Indians, I’ve learned from television” (12), which indicates that all that the protagonist knows about his people, in fact, it is not real but fictional. Zits’ sense of indigeneity seems rather limited. Despite the humor, we infer his sheer frustration over his lack of access to his own culture. Zits is a lonely individual and although he is partially white, his encounter with the white world and the urban setting are highly problematic.

James Cox has suggested that Indian American authors like Alexie and Vizenor have voiced and made visible a Native presence that counters the “vanishing” or “last of” tropes, which endure in media and popular culture.

Similarly, in the previous novel *Indian Killer*, the protagonist John Smith, reveals a number of issues related to whiteness and whites’ notions of themselves as well as of indigenous people. Born to a single teenage indigenous mother in the late 1960s, John becomes adopted within days of his birth by Daniel and Olivia Smith, a white upper middle class family who live childless in a wealthy part of Seattle. Lacking any information about his actual tribe origins and living under the pressures of his exclusively white environment, the boy soon becomes estranged from his family and peers, from white society, and ultimately, from himself. From early adulthood, he suffers from paranoia and delusions and he simply depends upon imagined stories about his potential alternative life on the reservation as well as on the memories of his indigenous mentor, Father Duncan, a culturally conflicted Spokane Jesuit priest. John ultimately commits suicide and the ending of the novel

promotes a rather nihilist vision. John's perceptions stem from being socialized white, from being indigenous, or from losing himself in his attempt to negotiate the two areas. *Indian Killer* is a portrayal of US white middle class society, focusing the attitudes, behaviors, and ways of life of the white folks and of Natives at the same time. Even more that with other characters, interpretive statements about John reflect the stance of the respective reader as to the character's identity, about who or what he "actually" is. Until the end, Alexie never comes quite out with what his positions or racial and cultural identities are in this novel. It is along with the conflicting character, therefore, that the reader might ultimately understand that despite everything, John has been a "real Indian" all his life. In all the three novels; *Indian Killer*, *Flight* and *The Absolute True Diary of a Part Time Indian* the protagonists can be identified as the "Lonely other in a White world". The boys leave the reservation and become aware of their differences and of their cultural inexperience in the white dominant urban context.

In particular, given the fraught cultural and literary history of American Indians, Zits' early demise at the beginning of the story we would seem to find ourselves in the presence of one more dead or failing Indian, maybe the inevitable outcome of a tragic and rage-filled life. But Zits is, in fact, through literary artifice, given the opportunity to change the course of events and the future trajectory of his life.

In *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the fourteen-year old protagonist, Arnold Spirit, decides to go to high school in the nearby white town of Rearden, despite this making him a "traitor" to his tribe. Arnold identifies alcohol and hopelessness as the plagues affecting his tribe and believes that education and interaction with people will allow him to create a better life for himself. Both novels are undeniably enjoyed by a teenage audience but at the same time they reflect on Native American historical trauma in terms of "suffering and the soul wound". These texts explore the death, the dispossession and the denigration of millions of Native people in America". Nevertheless, in the most two recent novels there is space for rather hopeful moments and conclusions. In *The Diary*, for example, the protagonist Arnold Spirit Junior, speaks directly to the reader and he is both a narrator, illustrator and a cartoonist. He does not feel good about himself, he is beaten because he lisps, stutters and looks like a freak, but with a pen in his hand he finds a sense

of “being important”. He tells his readers how it is like living his life. Both Zits and Arnold are very unique boys. At the beginning, Arnold lets us know that he was born with a peculiarity: “I was born with water on the brain. Okay, so that’s not exactly true. I was actually born with too much cerebral fluid inside my skull”. Later on, Arnold tells us that he had surgery immediately after birth in order to remove the excess “grease” from his brain and that luckily he has survived and grown up without experiencing serious brain damage. This latter element, is an autobiographical reference as the author experienced exactly the same problem during infancy. Arnold immediately opens up about his life on the reservation, about the poverty that haunts his parents and himself, about the lack of medical assistance that Indians are condemned to accept and his dreams of doing something valuable with his life. In fact, in the first pages of the novel he draws sketches of his parents and describes what they might have become only if somebody had given them an opportunity in life or if just someone had paid attention to their dreams. However, shortly afterwards we realize that both parents have been alcoholic although they might have been community college teachers or professional saxophonists. The plague of alcohol seems to be endemic on the reservation and the boy admits that he has only met five Indians that have never drunk in their life. One of them is his bandana-wearing grandmother “Drinking would shut down my seeing and my hearing and my feeling”, she says. Junior, just like his grandmother, is engaged with the world and full of anger and energy. He is genuinely content about his new experience in school and he is particularly excited about geometry classes. He is also aware that the other kids might target him fairly soon for his being thrilled about school. However, when he sits in a geometry class and finds his mother’s maiden name on his book, he cannot believe that his generation is still studying on such dated textbooks. “My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world”. (30) This moment is particularly enlightening as we really perceive how Indians are really affected by the same problems no matter how many years have passed. After having (accidentally) thrown an old geometry textbook at his teacher, the boy is suspended as his teacher reported minor injuries after the incident. Despite being upset about the child’s behavior, the teacher forgives and encourages him his student to leave his reservation if he

wants to be successful in life and leave poverty behind, so he applies for a wealthy white school which is twenty-two miles away. “You have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope.” And the most hope belongs to white people. So Junior makes the courageous decision to leave his home and go to Reardan. The action of throwing his mother’s old book at this white teacher M.P. represents another notable shift from victimry to survivance as it symbolizes the refusal of the inferior education offered to him and to the other reservation students stuck in the colonial dystopia of public education. Therefore, even if he has to walk more than twenty miles to get there each day because there isn’t enough money for fuel, the boy transfers to Reardan High School, losing the companionship of his best friend and feeling even more separated from his reservation community. Junior describes this moment as “the loneliest time in his life”.

In spite of these initial difficulties, Junior is also seen as personification of hope. His teacher describes how everyone has given up hope apart from Arnold: “You’ve been fighting since you were born’ he said “You kept your hope. And now, you have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope”. (9) What follows are the humorous and exhausting efforts of Junior to maintain his Native heritage while learning to decode the predominantly white social school context. Even Mr P, his teacher, reveals what it was like to be a teacher many years before “I didn’t literally kill Indians. We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren’t trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture.” The man apologizes for the conduct and the mistreatment of the Indian kids on behalf of the white people and teachers and admits that those behaviors belong to the bad times of the past. Once we recognize the relationship between Mr. P and Pratt, Ellen Forney’s satirical cartoon of Junior split into two racialized halves - one side white and affluent; the other impoverished and Indian (*Absolutely True Diary* 57) - resonates differently, for it might be read as a contemporary version of Pratt’s “before” and “after” photographs, intended by Pratt as visual proof of the benefits to killing the Indian (Baxter 75). Although Alexie identifies this cartoon as “the one that ends up really getting the book” (“Interview” n. pag.), the cartoon has an ironic relationship to the story that Junior narrates; the positive role models Forney places on the “white” side of the image can also

be found in Junior's family (for example, his grandmother), and Junior's insistence that he will always be Indian challenges the "vanishing past" that Forney places on the "Indian" side. As I discuss below, the uneasy fit between the cartoons and the narrative directly contributes to debates about the meaning of the novel's success.

The chapter "Go means go" opens with a moving conversation between the protagonist and his parents who inevitably recognize how hard it is for them to afford such an exclusive school and they also warn him about how angry everyone on the rez is going to be for being the first one to leave. One of the most infuriated is certainly Junior's best friend Rowdy who absolutely hates Junior for betraying his people and for going in search of hope and the chapter concludes with the two having a lively argument.

Crucially, Arnold does not leave the reservation permanently, and his experiences away from the reservation transform his relationships within it, and develop a renewed understanding of what it means to be Indian.

Certainly, Junior realizes what it means to be an Indian when he finds himself in very white and very racist Reardan where he is immediately stared at by high flying students looking elegant and smart in their Ralph Lauren shirts and their Tommy Hilfiger trousers. However, in spite of prejudice and appearance the boy is also regarded with a certain curiosity by his school mates and Reardan immediately becomes appealing and friendlier when Junior meets the angelic Penelope, a girl with blond hair that soon starts chatting with him. She asks him what his name is and when the young man responds Junior she laughs heartily without imagining how common that name is on the reservation. "I had no idea that Junior was a weird name. It's a common name on my rez, on any rez. You walk into any trading post on any rez in the United States, and shout, "Hey Junior!" and seventeen guys will turn around" (60). However, soon after, to Penelope's shock everyone realizes that his name is Arnold too, as that is his official name.

This duplicity in the protagonist's name is particularly important; the name Junior expresses a concept of universality for all the boys in every reservation across the nation while his real name, Arnold, invites the readers to think that in this particular context, the new school, the boy is being given the opportunity to start afresh and for the first time not to be called "Junior" anymore.

Progressively he learns to leave behind a great deal of his heritage. For example, when he reads the school rules and notices “no fistfighting” he understands that he could never replicate in Reardan what used to be common at home. These habits are not easy to eradicate, though. Although he has always lost in fistfights he feels keen to defy the tall white boys if they would keep on calling him “Chief”, or “Tonto”, or “Squaw Boy”. His effort to adapt to the new environment encourages him to change his lifelong behavior as well. Similarly, his sister decides to leave her home and explore the outside world by getting married to a man from Montana and she moves with him shortly afterwards. The sense of surprise of Junior’s sister when she writes a letter to him is enormous. She is enthusiastic about her new life in Montana and about living with both Indians and White people. This shows that the new generation is willing to experience other contexts and ways of living by embracing the opportunities of the external world as well as its challenges.

Arnold becomes more and more popular once Penelope elects him her friend and the pair starts being seen by everyone in school holding hands and going out together. Arnold finds out that the girl is anorexic one day when he hears her vomiting in the toilet. They become close, even going together to the winter dance. Though he has been passing as middle-class, Penelope finds out that Arnold is poor and feels sorry for him. They become semi-girlfriend and boyfriend Arnold is completely fascinated by her. Soon the boy finds out that Penelope dreams of leaving her hometown too and that nomadic instinct belongs to white people too. “I hate this little town. It’s so small, too small. Everything about it is small. The people here have small ideas. Small dreams. They all want to marry each other and live here forever...I want to leave as soon as I can. I think I was born with a suitcase”. (111) The two adolescents find themselves being much more similar than expected. For instance, both of them would like to become architects in order to build beautiful things and overall, thanks to the love for Penelope, the great divide between his world and hers becomes smaller and less significant. Junior starts feeling more like a part-time Indian; he is one of the many Juniors when he return home to the Spokane reservation and becomes Arnold in Rearden.

The boy soon makes new friends such as Gordy, a school genius, and tries to inspire him in his learning and at the same time decides to start playing basketball after having been

encouraged by his coach. When he plays he feels like a warrior and then becomes a mascot for his team.

There is a turning point in the novel when the protagonist, in spite of all the opportunities that Reardan has given to him, recognizes how lucky he is to have a family like his and that after all, he has seen enough neglect and trouble in the white side of the world too.

In particular, when his beloved grandma passes away, Arnold realizes that her greatest gift was tolerance and forgiveness. During the wake and the funeral Alexie explores how the family and the community come together demonstrating valuable tribal unity.

The language of the novel, in particular in the concluding chapters, reflects compassion and empathy. It stands for a love ethic that promotes a way out of nihilism and perpetual grief. Even if Arnold's father is an alcoholic, he still loves his son and so does the child "I mean, yeah, my dad would sometimes go on a drinking binge and be gone for a week, but those white dads can completely disappear without ever living the living room". He loves unconditionally his family, his tribe, his people and even his reservation but he understands he must leave it in order to escape the hopelessness that dwells there. Alexie in an interview said that the *Diary's* "theme is about escape" and he hopes "it encourages all sorts of trapped people to feel like they can escape". In leaving his reservation Arnold compares himself to an American immigrant "millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream". He realizes that in fact he is a member of many "tribes" (ATD, 257) Indeed, the boy belongs to multiple tribes of people around the world: "I realised that sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms." In addition to that, Alexie reminds readers that reservations were designed to make Indians invisible, and that by moving beyond its boundary Arnold is more like an 'old-time nomad': "I was reading this book about old-time Indians, about how we used to be nomadic'...'I'm not nomadic' Rowdy said. 'Hardly anybody on this rez is nomadic. Except for you".

Flight and the *Diary* provide answers and inspirations for Indians seeking to heal the soul wound of historical trauma. Moreover, the two novels become cautionary tales about the effects of isolation and the power of refusal. As Zits begins to "get unlonely", he sees the

connection between himself and the others. Both Zits and Junior ultimately have the same epiphany – that they belong to a family, community or nation. Their understanding of this connection is the result of “loss and pain”, experiences that Alexie states “almost always” characterize Native American searches for identity (Charles). Despite emotional hardships and the legacy of colonial violence, Junior and Zits refuse to merely survive; they are motivated to thrive. With their futures no longer determined, Alexie’s young heroes prevail to affirm Native presence in Young Adult Fiction more broadly Furthermore, the author admits that the majority of his readers are white, hence, he is making Native American history visible to all and he is inviting his literary audience to reflect on how the legacy of the past is impacting the young Indians of today and their flight attempts.

CHAPTER 6

OVERCOMING TRAUMA: the (Un)Solvable Equation.

In 2007, when working on his National Book Award winning book *The Absolute True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie published the epigrammatic *Flight*, a novel where torment, tension and post-traumatic nightmares play an original background to the story of Zits, the time-travelling teenager with homicidal tendencies. The protagonist introduces himself with a powerful opening “Call me Zits”. This time though, instead of a perilous hunt for the great white whale, the half Indian-American orphan undertakes a voyage of a completely different dimension. All young characters presented make a desperate attempt to analyse history and the real meaning of justice and security in the multicultural American contemporary society of today, shocked and scarred by the threaten of terrorism. The novel, which was partly inspired by a documentary on 9/11 in which some flight instructors had trained the terrorists to fly, expresses the sense of betrayal and fear that haunt our times. *Flight* is positioned in response to American national rhetoric that isolates the events of 9/11 as a “rupture” in history. Instead, the story contextualized the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 within a condensed history of acts of domestic terror in the U.S. Moreover, the book critiques the popular definitions and descriptions of collective trauma. The main narrative is based on a brutalized adolescent who turns his rage against the American public by firing an automatic weapon in a bank during rush hour. However, the story is also imbued with elements of supernatural, as the protagonist alternates moments of life and death, falling and resurrecting again and again until he finds some enlightenment in the end.

Along with the themes such as violence, adolescence, morality and being a Native American, the novel explores the different meaning through the perspective of the multiple identities that the main character adopts. Zits is a fifteen-year-old delinquent, an orphan son

of an Irish mother and an Indian father, running away from his 21st foster home in Seattle. He is acne-scarred and because his Indian father has abandoned him and his mother when he was born, and his mother died of breast cancer when he was six, he has bounced from foster family to jail to foster family for the past nine years. He has just enough clothes to fit in a small backpack, he has suffered extensive mental, sexual, and physical abuse and has little self-esteem. Chased and floored by the cops, the boy adopts several identities on multiple occasions and passes into history.

The apocalyptic brutality of the tale of the time-travelling teenager was influenced by Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. Just as Vonnegut combines supernatural elements with a view of historical events during the bombing of Dresden, so the young hero of *Flight* becomes the device around which larger questions about collective guilt and terror take place.

Alexie at least partly owes his idea of unexpected time travel as manifestation of psychological trauma to Vonnegut's novel. This is acknowledged via the epigram of *Flight*: "Poo-tee-weet?", which references the final line of *Slaughterhouse Five*.

So with the close of *Slaughterhouse Five*, Alexie begins *Flight* and uses the literary device of time travelling in a similar way. The protagonist of *Slaughterhouse Five*, Billy Pilgrim, doubts that he will ever finish writing his novel about the fire-bombing of Dresden. During the twenty-three years since returning from WWII, he has written at least five hundred pages, but he cannot seem to put an end to his literary effort. The frustration here stems not only from the inadequacy of the written form to convey the extremes of his experiences, but also from a sharp sense of time.

Vonnegut's apparent adoption of the science fiction mode is initiated by a narrative of personal psychological trauma. Psychological trauma may follow from the direct experience of the unimaginable, so exposing and testing the limits of imagination. Doctors are unable to help in such case as there are no constants yet or standards in the imagination by which to diagnose, as there are in the physical world.

La Capra explains that "in post-traumatic situations in which one relieves (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial difference between then and now

where one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities". (1999)

The sufferers of psychological trauma are anchored to a particular time in their life that dominates and impacts negatively upon their interpretation of the present, and thoughts of the future; the "here and now" (at least episodically) becomes secondary to the "there and then". For Pilgrim that anchoring time is composed of his experiences during WWII; for Zits, it is being abused. In order to engage the reader in the psychological effects of trauma, Alexie, like Vonnegut presents Zits who, like Pilgrim, becomes "unstuck in time". His delusional temporal experience is entirely governed by traumatic memories. Pilgrim's mental illness is such that his time-travel fantasy is for him simply another aspect of reality. Whilst the wartime memories are based on Pilgrim's lived WWII experiences, the future elements of his journey are taken from Trout's science fiction novels, interpolated strategically within the novel. Billy's traumatized imagination uses these stories to unveil a myth (the alien fourth dimension) to explain the inability to remain in the present. "The fourth dimensional disease" of post-war trauma occurs when an individual is unable to concile the severity of their war time life with their domestic post-war existence. Victims of trauma like Billy Pilgrim and Zits, unable to live with constant reference to the horrors of war, or harsh reality, may retreat from present time into a timeless fantasy world of denial. Peter Suedfeld notes that traumatic stress can demand "the utmost energization of coping resources" (850). So Pilgrim finds himself imagining complex interactions with the colourful Tralfamadorians; alien creatures who "see in four dimensions", and "are able to concentrate on the happy moments; and to ignore the unhappy ones". (Vonnegut 142)

Just as Pilgrim creates a fictional narrative that allows him to integrate his trauma into his existence, so Zits creates fictional identities and scenes that, though initially dissociative, eventually allow the protagonist narrate the painful truth of his trauma. Both novels claim that the knowledge required to heal the disease of the "fourth dimension" may only be found in that same "dimension" using the imagination.

While Pilgrim's imagined future is based on the readings of Trout's science fiction, Zits constructs an imagined past from a conflation of cinema fiction, Historical re-enactments and Indian trauma. Though the events created by Zits have some parallels in "real

American history”, it is important to recognize that the boy is not literally being plunged through time and space to experience actual historical events. Like Pilgrim, his journey is entirely internal.

He changes his identity to escape a painful past and time-shifts during very diverse historical periods and each phase corresponds to a trial or to the overcome of a traumatic episode. Throughout his travels, Zits’s experiences in “the bodies of peripheral figures” (Ibbarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco), both Indigenous and settler, complicate a neat reading of the novel as merely a search for human connection. Firstly, he becomes an Indian teenager accompanied by another white adolescent who is ironically named Justice and who is maybe the only one who can understand him and save him from that eternal solitude that he has experienced so far. The friendship with Justice also represents an example of the intertwining of individual narratives and state racial politics. When the two boys meet in jail, Zits observes the vengeful lead of Justice but he also declares that “this white boy could save me from being lonely”. (24) At this point of the story, despite his generalized anger, the Indian hero is unsure about who precisely is to blame for his situation, and he turns, before his flight even begins, to a white settler for help.

In the lively dialogue that follows Chapter 3, the two boys reflect and express their views about their respective heritages. “I am sorry that my people nearly destroyed your people. This country, the so-called United States, is evil. And you Indians were the only people who fought against that white evil. Everybody else thinks we live in a democracy. Everybody else thinks we’re free.”

“Indians have never been free” responds Zits, pointing out that the very first inhabitants of the North American continent were in fact the ones who have always been denied one of the most sacred principles of the American Constitution: freedom. The exchange between the young men, begins to comment upon the unjust political climate in the United States. Justice’s distinction between “my people” and “our people” puts an immediate separation between them two and this shows inequity, while the use of “we” in his statement illustrates that “everyone” has a stake in history. At the same time, Zits marvels “I just met this guy, and I feel like he cares about my skin and me” (21). This is not only a reference to acne, but also takes a political valence as the boy feels accepted for being Indian as well.

Acne here carries a double meaning; on one hand it creates a conception of universal humanity based on a shared experience of pain across racial differences, while on the other, and more importantly, it signals the historical and contemporary control that the American settler state holds over Indigenous populations. In this sense, the narrative itself embodies the many contradictions of a multicultural state, which the protagonist and other “minority” groups are forced to live in.

As a result of this progressive, consuming distress Zits dreams of hurting and killing those who have oppressed his people for centuries. Taking revenge and letting go of the past are recurring themes in Sherman Alexie’s fiction. This is particularly evident when the two teenagers together decide to rob a bank in the desperate attempt “to bring back all the Indians and make disappear all the white people” in a sort of macabre and symbolic Ghost Dance.

Then the repetitive, almost obsessive sound of the pistols “*Click, click, click*” in preparation for the attack, that seems to recall “*This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends*”, the famous line by T.S. Eliot in *The Hollow Men*, prepares us to a rather pessimistic and dystopic perception of reality. Yet Alexie makes us question if that may really be the only interpretation of revenge and invites us to think that a “Second chance” is always possible. We will never know if the two boys go ahead and shoot or if they finally decide to change their mind before it is too late. He intentionally leaves us in doubt. As readers, we cannot help but wondering who is the real responsible for the massacre, who started it and who made it stop, what the real role of the police is, if one of the robbers is ironically called Justice and if on this occasion he is friend or foe.

It is the sound of the guns constantly clicking that gives voice and space to our consciousness, to that ambivalence and faith that we have in authorities that make us wonder if justice is acting well after all and if it is always there to protect us, the eternal human and moral obligation that helps us distinguish right from wrong.

“The next day, I stand in the lobby of a bank in downtown Seattle. Fifty or sixty people are here with me: men, women, and children of many different colours. I hear four or five different languages being spoken. And I guess these people have many different religions.

But none of them matters. I know these people must die so my mother and father can return”.

As Zits aims at the faces of those strangers and prepares to kill them, a man points out “You are not real” taking away the drama and the suspense of the moment but also implicating that revenge is never real. It is a purely fictional structure in our minds, no more than an artificial circle inside another circle of ghosts killing other ghosts and so on. And this is the moment when we can just make it possible and auspicious that Reason will prevail on violence. As the protagonist reflects: “Is revenge a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle?” he’s referring to the non- sequential spiral-like architecture that drives our actions.

It is Zits himself who will be shot in the head by the bank guard but, once again, we don’t seem to realize if what just happened is real or imaginary and this sensation of ambiguity is intended as it raises more and more questions and arguments for difficult or impossible responses. His story somehow mirrors that of the man condemned to be hanged in *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* and as in Bierce’s story all these events are occurring at the moment of death, but in *Flight* Zits finds himself very much alive in a warm hearted denouement.

The theme of the constant change of identities and the general structure was inspired by Kurt Vonnegut’s masterpiece *Slaughterhouse 5*. In this novel, the central character, Billy Pilgrim, becomes “unstuck in time”, shuttling between episodes from World War Two and other moments in his life. Vonnegut infuses supernatural events with a compressed view of historical events in order to de-normalize the war experience and exposes aspects of collective guilt associated to the images of the American led bombing of Dresden. Similarly, also in *Flight* the time-traveller protagonist becomes a device around which larger questions arise. Taking his epigraph “Po-tee-weet?” from Vonnegut’s novel, Alexie makes evident that he is adapting *Slaughterhouse Five*’s narrative techniques and its global anti-war message in order to speak against the perpetuation of violence in the United States. In the words of the critic Joseph Coulombe: “By exposing the parallels between different types of violence, *Flight* broadens the way readers think about global violence and fosters

understanding between ostensibly different people” (131). The critic implies that beneath the surface all people share a connection despite “ostensible” differences.

The boy adopts multiple identities as the narration goes on. With an epic, yet short-winded and conversational tone Alexie provocatively makes us enquire about security in America when Zits, who has only just survived a bullet in his brain (or maybe not?), wakes up in a motel room in the company of a policeman who deliberately hands him a real gun, a .357 Magnum. This time he turns into a tall white guy with a very pure skin named Hank and, most importantly, he becomes an FBI agent involved in the Red River demonstration of 1975. Hank and Art, who is apparently his partner, head out together in what is a truly debatable attempt to “save the world”.

We are immediately made aware of Art’s hatred and dislike toward the Indians. “I wish Custer would have killed a few more”- declares the FBI agent while Zits recognizes in the other car two other men, Horse and Elk, two activists from IRON (Indigenous Rights Now). He remembers from a documentary on television that IRON protected traditional Indians from the centralized tribal government, called HAMMER and the latter ones used to secretly work with FBI and kill all its members.

It is soon revealed that Hoarse and Elk are truly double agents, traitors of IRON and they are keeping hostage and torturing a young Indian male called Junior whose front teeth had been knocked out. At the end of the episode, Junior will be shot dead by Art, the FBI agent and Zits can only sadly conclude that he is “not any better than these men” as here the position of the Indians is ambiguous as well.

Alexie uses the time-shifting device to explore themes. Not only to make us sympathise with Zits, but also to present the history of Native American in the United States. The incident described in the novel discusses a fictitious group of indigenous activists called IRON, but this is based on the actual civil rights group, the American Indian Movement and the murder of Junior refers to the historical Wounded Knee incident which took place in 1973 near the Pine Ridge Reservation, in South Dakota. What is here revealed is the complexity of Native American struggle. Hoarse and Elk are described as heroes of their people but they have sold out to the government. Zits is shocked by Junior’s bravery, he shows a fierce integrity whereas he acts without realizing the consequences of his actions.

By considering himself –as both Indian and person- in the light of this incident, Zits learns that true integrity is both more difficult than simple rebellion, and more worthwhile in terms of virtue.

As the multiple transformations continue throughout the book, the protagonist experiences a number of traumatic events. He remembers an early childhood event when one of his many white foster fathers had sexually molested him. “Things that hurt. Things that made me bleed”, he explains later and by elaborating the trauma he finds himself in a long time ago Indian camp in company of the legendary Crazy Horse, the “magical one who was immune to bullets and was never photographed” and of Sitting Bull preparing to fight the glorious battle of Little Big Horn.

On this occasion Zits is symbolically voiceless. He represents the voicelessness of the 19th century Native Americans and the inability for him to express the truth of his own crimes and of his sufferings. Although the battle is not described we learn that it is a symbol of revenge towards white soldiers being killed and punished by triumphant Indians. It is in this passage that the theme of violence is mostly explored. The sight of the desecration is unsettling for Zits and the reality of war and violence is much harder for him to witness and elaborate, and while he is about to attack a soldier he abstains by closing his eyes.

“This is what revenge can do to you” says Captain Moustache when Zits becomes an old soldier with a strong Irish accent, fighting the Indians. As we read about another war scene full of atrocities, we can only conclude that everyone on both sides has shown himself capable of hatred and murder, Zits feels ashamed and compelled towards slaughter.

There is a sudden change of tone in the final chapters which seem completely disconnected from the rest of the novel. In particular, it is when Zits finds himself alone in small airplane, flying peacefully “below a ceiling of clouds and above the ocean” wondering about the destiny of all the people he has seen and met before. “I wonder about Small Saint and Bow Boy. Did they escape? What happened after I left old Gus’s body? The protagonist confronts himself with another character. He becomes a flight instructor and ends up training an Ethiopian man to fly even though he fears that he is a terrorist because of his Muslim faith. Here the social conflicts and the post 9/11 setting become extremely poignant. Jimmy/Zits’ racial tensions appear really strong as he deals with the betrayal not

only of a friend but also of someone who was considered to be American. Initially Jimmy worries about Abbas being a terrorist only because of his heritage and is involved in what simply seems to be a racial assumption, a short-lived prejudice. Later on, we learn that he is truly a terrorist and the section can just explore the levels of paranoia and fear run through the American subconscious. It is worth mentioning that this almost epigrammatic novel, was inspired in part by a documentary on 9/11, in which some of the flight instructors who had trained the terrorists to fly expressed their sense of betrayal at the use to which their instruction had been put... The book is also a response to American national rhetoric that isolates the events of 9/11 as a “rupture” in history. This is not just applicable to 9/11 and to the effects that terrorism has in our contemporary era, but it is also a reference to the shootings of Columbine where the author analyses the different levels of hatred and violence that the novel invites us to reflect upon.

It becomes pretty clear at this point that prejudice is crucial in both parties. The Ethiopian accuses all the Americans of being profit-oriented and of thinking only about “business”, while Jimmy, the white pilot, keeps on suspecting that Abbas is a real terrorist mainly because of his origins and his appearance.

During this very distressing moment of the reading Zits wonders why people hurt each other. While Abbas accuses Americans of arrogance, Jimmy points out that Abbas has lived in the United States for fifteen years, but this one replies that he has only lived there because his real house had been destroyed. The memory of the terrorist and of his repulsive and criminal actions haunts Jimmy and as we might realise, in a sort of literary dramatic irony, Jimmy deliberately crashes a plane himself simply thinking “We’re all the same people and we’re falling”.

With this final line of the section the author refuses to make any definite statement about racism as all the characters equally commit sin and betray someone else. According to Alexie, the vicious circle and the legacy that revenge involves are applicable to all the characters. They are all part of it. Even if Zits’s life can all fit in a small backpack, all the characters are portrayed with a symbolic baggage of traumatic events, bereavements and neglect. Zits has seen a lot of violence in his life and he dreams about hurting and killing people, but at times he experiences his own death and shot is a form of redemption.

Alexie rethinks about his previous politics in the wake of 9/11 and the war in Iraq. He also structures the novel around a series of “personal betrayals” in order to explore “the notion that violence is perpetuated on both sides of any conflict”.

During the final pages the troubled urban Indian protagonist and narrator renounces his criminal past, finds his perfect foster family and declares his real name.

After an idealized re-enactment of the disastrous opening chapter, this rebirth is symbolically completed when the boy’s beautiful new mother figure, Mary, helps apply skin treatments that will make him “brand-new”, an act of maternal kindness that leaves Zits helpless and crying as a new born in Mary’s arm, begging her forgiveness and pleading that she will call him Michael. Now, warmly ensconced in loving domesticity, Michael has finally filled the voids left by his biological parents, and so his narrative is poignantly concluded. Yet, following the novel sequence of time travel, torturous executions and political terrorism, even Alexie admits that the appearance of this ideal family is similar to a *deus ex machine*.

On this instance, then, Alexie chooses “politics over art” and a “socially responsible” conclusion for “the native world” He also reveals that his real name is Michael and reflects that regardless of everything you may have done in your life, even bad things, you get a shot of redemption. Zits has lost everything close and dear to him, but he also learns that violence is not a valid instrument to pursue a better future.

Ironically, the boy has been finally adopted by a fireman that he is also Officer Dave’s brother. After risking of becoming a regular delinquent and a murderer, Zits ends his story in a hopeful way. He eventually comes back to the comfort, to the care and love of a normal family and he ends up trusting in the concept of justice and in the authorities. This conclusion reminds us of *Indian Killer* where the main character, symbolically called John Smith, is adopted by a respectable and highly educated white family.

By following this pattern, Alexie suggests a model that is a fundamental part of American literature: the white boy brought up by the Indians. This time the Spokane author inverts a vast tradition that has seen Natty Bumppo as part of the Delaware and the protagonist of *Dance with the Wolves* living as a member of a Sioux tribe, to introduce us to the theme of the *Homeless Indians*, torn between the need of expressing their original identity and the

influence of the Whites, who seem to adopt and kidnap them at the same time. In both novels the foster parents seem to perfectly understand the value and the importance of the Native American heritage and expect their children to be proud of their culture but they inevitably take them away from the original context to build a new one around them.

We may argue that belonging to an alternative specific tribe would be better than belonging to no tribe at all, especially if we think about all the problematic consequences that follow when we are in the presence of the *Urban Indians*, often seen in poverty or sleeping under the bridges of a city in a continent that they have lost twice, in the double perspective of Indians and of Americans. It does not mean that the wound of loss can't be healed in a different place. "We are what / We have lost" Sherman Alexie points out. Having lost a great deal of their past doesn't mean that the Indians are ever completely free to be whatever or whoever they want but represents a major absence, a deeper privation. Consequently, the research on one's roots is ongoing no matter where the Indians are moved to or who they live with.

Despite the truthful and complex vision that has historically and socially involved the Native- Americans, Alexie proposes a hopeful twist, a creative innovative perspective for his heroes of the Urban World, a mixture of trauma, rage and imagination.

As we notice, at the end of *Flight* the troubled adolescent is finally welcomed in a white family, leaving his old traumatic life behind and abandons once more the resentment and the revengeful purposes he had made before. All contradictions and uncertainties have apparently been solved by Zits's inclusion in the foster family. After the experiences "in other people's skin", Zits finally allows himself to "be ready to accept who he is", and he leaves behind the dysfunctional teenager he was. He is suddenly "just Michael", all history seemingly erased. Just like the settler readers, Michael has now a grasp on Indian history and relationships that seem to allow him to shed his previous worries.

In this happy or at least hopeful and open ending Zits learns an effective lesson. Don't kill people because 'all life is sacred.' Don't betray or hate. Don't leave your children and family alone." Where does this cycle end? We can't only help but wonder.

That is the unsolvable equation that the author keeps on presenting to his readers, as well as subordinate themes on how love and sympathy can contribute to save a life and on how no one can be alone and isolated forever, no matter what the situation is.

“I open my eyes” says Zits when he wakes up for the last time in the novel “I think all the people in this bank are better than I am. They have better lives than I do. Or maybe they don’t. Maybe we’re all lonely. Maybe some of them also hurtle through time and see war, war, war. Maybe we’re all in this together.”

I believe this hopeful, interracial conclusion to *Flight* represents a clear shift in the author’s vision. A vision that for so long has been marked by anger, nihilism and irony. The widespread despair of Indians has now changed and so has Micheal/Zits whose final empathic shift represents a new stage where Native Americans leave their indigeneity behind to find their way to the future.

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CHAPTER 7

CATCHING THE FUTURE: HUCK MEETS HOLDEN.

The *Catcher in the Rye* remains such an appealing and influential piece of literature. The main character, Holden Caulfield, is making the transition from adolescence to adulthood and such transition is awkward, painful and filled with self-doubt. This is due to the substantial difference between the way that Holden believes the world should be and the way in which it actually functions. He is cynical, suspicious of relationships with nearly everyone, wary of intimacy, and he perceives himself to be extraordinarily lonely.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the story is told as Holden is looking back at the past events from the perspective of the psychiatric institution he has been admitted to, and the final chapter tells the reader how far Holden may have developed: “A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keep asking me if I’m going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It’s such a stupid question in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you’re going to do till you do it?” (214). Salinger leaves the reader uncertain about Holden’s future at the end of the novel. There are signs that he has stabilized to a certain extent, but he has retained many of his rebellious attitudes and has clearly not found yet a stable, desirable place for himself. Readers are left uncertain if Holden is ready to face his society here at the end of the book. Will he go back to his old pattern of behaviour or will he be expelled again from another school? Or has he, with some help from his little sister Phoebe, come to realize that even idealists have to compromise from time to time?

Even in the case of Salinger himself, he has been determined to remain silent and off limits. It is as if the author could not stand the success and fame that his work obtained. Like a true Holden Caulfield, he rejected the media and the public eye, he was an author who wanted to stay invisible behind his work, so it is no wonder that little certain information is known

about him. Salinger has been unwilling to share any personal information, or to comment on the book, as Ian Hamilton experienced in his *Search for J. D. Salinger*:

“Salinger berated me for harassing his family...He didn’t suppose he could stop me from writing a book about him, but he thought he ought to let me know –‘for whatever little it may be worth’-that he had suffered so many intrusions on his privacy that he could endure no more of it -not ‘in a single lifetime’”(Hamilton, 7).

Salinger was obviously not delighted about the overwhelming interest and fame he experienced as his novel became so popular. Hamilton finds possible connections between the novel and the author after careful investigation, but Salinger himself chose to remain hidden. This attitude may be seen in Holden Caulfield too: “Besides, I’m not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything...I mean that’s all I told D.B. about, and he’s my *brother* and all...Now he’s out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute” (1-2). Holden expresses contempt for Hollywood, the film industry, the movies, and everything mainstream and commercialized. This fits well with the author’s persona, as he has chosen to shy away from the spotlight and is annoyed by the enormous interest in him and his book.

The need to criticize and reject what is imposed by society and the inability to live within it, is a strong theme in *The Catcher in the Rye*. The internal and external struggle to grow up in relation to the values that society tries to impose on these boys, can be seen in Huck, Junior and in Holden, and this constitutes an important part of what leads to their breakdowns. Holden and Huck, for example, experience two different forms of breakdowns, but they are faced with many of the same struggles from their past and present that prevent them from developing into reasonably well-adjusted adults. However, there is an important distinction that needs to be made. In Holden’s case we notice what appears to be almost a voluntary extension of adolescence. In spite of being just on the cusp of adulthood, Holden prefers to elongate his state of youth, possibly because growing up and entering adults’ society means to belong to a world that is brutal and unappealing. Both novels are rich in incidents, varied in characterization and extremely meaningful. Each story is narrated by the central figure, an adolescent whose remarkable language is both a reflection and criticism of his education, his environment, and his times. Each one is the story of a quest-

an adventure in the age pattern of a young lad making his way into a not particularly friendly adult world. These boys are outcast, without family and friends who flee the restraints of the civilization which would make them its victims. The boys journey through the world in search of what they think is freedom.

There are several people and things, not many, however, that are in Holden's terms "nice". There are many more that are "phony". He does not understand the world, but he knows how one should behave in it. Huck is also trapped by a society whose shortcomings he sees, and he says 'I can't stand it!'. Holden's equivalent is 'It depresses me' and 'it kills me'. Holden's nonconformity asserts itself early in the novel. He has been told by one of the masters at Pencey Prep, from which is about to be dismissed, that 'life is a game'. "Some game", the protagonist comments "If you get on the side where all the hot-shoots are, then it's a game, all right. I'll admit that. But if you get on the *other side* where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it. Nothing. No game". At the age of sixteen, he has learned to suspect the teachings that the adults give him.

On the contrary, we tend to perceive Huck more like an adult than like a child. In spite of being younger, Huck seems more resilient than Holden, he produces an alternative society. His loneliness does not concern us like the melancholic solitude that Holden portrays and unlike Salinger's hero, Huck's ending is far from being pessimistic, but remains unexpected and open.

Holden provides a critique of his society, its institutions and "phony" characters. His ongoing revolt against all that goes on around him is finally seen to be intimately related to his own internal struggles and to a difficult past he has not sufficiently dealt with. It is obvious that when the characters experience internal struggles, their surroundings will often be viewed negatively. Holden can aspire to live a prosperous life as he is intelligent, comes from a stable economic background and could have plenty of opportunities to succeed in New York during the 1950's. These positive aspects can unfortunately not really help them, since Holden is constantly frustrated and dissatisfied with his life. The adolescent is lonely, always ineffective, plays the rebel by leaving a school from which he has already been expelled. And in running away he gets into more trouble than what he had in school. New York City turns out to be a great deal worse than Pencey Prep. Holden's rebellion is more

tormented than Huck's. Salinger has a much more pessimistic view of the world. Huck's escape is temporary. Holden has no escape at all. He cannot really run away, but he lies and rails against the things are ...his "craziness", as he calls it. And this "craziness" is one of the reasons why the young people in America like reading about Holden. Not only does he speak their language, but they feel a sense of identity with his rebellion thoughts. The adolescent often assumes an extravagant role possibly to protect his identity and boyhood. Even if he is restless, miserable, raging and alone throughout the novel, we never seem to forget the fact that he is still a sixteen-year-old. There is a moment in the book when he defiantly puts his hunting cap on backwards and tells a number of lies to the mother of one of his classmates, who, according to the protagonist, is "the biggest bastard that ever went to Pencey, in the whole crumby history of the school". (p.71)

Holden has also a propensity about to play-act for himself as well as other people. After he has been beaten up by Maurice, he pictures himself, his hand over a wound in the stomach, bleeding slightly from the mouth, walking down the stairs, killing Maurice and calling Jane, the girl he likes, to come and bandage him. As for Huck, he prefers a lot more not to be noticed, but at the same time it is also true that he is running away with a slave. Huck is in many ways much more mature than Holden, but it is, however, worth mentioning that, in sticky situations, Huck becomes one of the most accomplished liars of American literature. He manages to invent stories on the spot to fit any situations and often elaborates on his lies for the fun of it. Henry Nash Smith states that because such lies are always about disasters, they "reveal the gloomy sub-stratum of his personality...His memory is stored with images of violence and calamity...especially of boys left alone in the world by the death of parents". However, having "a gloomy sub-stratum" is something that belongs to both adolescents and adults. Both boys are self-critical and show a lack of confidence which is a trademark of adolescence. Huck is much less uncertain about himself than Holden is, but at the same time, he knows that he can take care of himself, while Holden's story is one of a boy who cannot quite do the same. Unlike Huck, Holden's perception of himself is relentless. "I'm one of those very yellow guys", brave only "when I watch myself getting tough in the mirror". (117)

Huckleberry Finn is one of the first portraits of adolescence in American Literature, in line with the traditional view of American innocence, but with the emphasis on initiation into the adult world. In *The Catcher in the Rye* adolescence has been transformed into something that appears more vulnerable and private, with an emphasis on disenchantment and sensitivity. Salinger is deeply concerned with his hero's problems.

We know that Huck is two three years younger than Holden, but we see him more mature. Huck is a realist and seems to be better off on the raft by himself. Huck remains an optimist despite the way adults behave. He rarely expects the worst. These two boys are poles apart. But in a way, just like Huck, Holden is a refugee himself. He flees the campus of Pencey Prep before he is formally expelled, and returns to New York City to have three days of freedom before rejoining his family. Pencey Prep is only the most recent of a series of unsuccessful academic experiences. "One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by peonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window. I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy".

Huck's world, realistically portrayed as mid-America, in the middle of the nineteenth century, is also a world full of hypocrisy

Twain and Salinger have the artistry to prove that young people of any generation have much in common and are afflicted by uncertainty. No matter where or when he lives, a boy is still a boy.

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CHAPTER 8

LEAVING THOSE KIDS ALONE.

One of the principal naturalized myths of the United States is that the individual takes the precedence over the larger community and is therefore unconstrained by society, culture and history. This ideal is clearly evident in American literature, where there is a well established emphasis on the individual and individualism by both American authors and the postwar scholars who constructed the canon. On the whole, American literary realism has often been attributed with the belief in the efficacy of the individual to free himself from social control.

When reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the image of a non-conformist subject transcending the social orders limitations and narrowness is vital to understanding the novels's position in national consciousness. Jonathan Arac proposes that the novel has been canonized precisely because it maintains the dominant culture's prescribed myth of the individual having free will. Hence the notion that subjects can simply divorce themselves from such systems and freely develop their own minds outside the borders of society.

Nearly all discussion of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* consists of an elaboration of Mark Twain's description of it as "a book of mine where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers a defeat".

Huck Finn, according to Coleman O'Parsons, "is the protesting battleground on which conscience, custom, and law (the Moral sense in different aspects) clash with primal sympathy, the impulsive will to freedom..." This view is amplified in Henry Nash Smith's introduction to the Riverside edition of the novel, in which Huck Finn is presented as a version of "natural man", coming into conflict with all the powers of conventional society and transcending them (at least in part) by nature of a spontaneous and untutored goodness.

When Huck Finn reaches the “freedom” of Jackson’s Island, he believes he has fulfilled his American destiny by imposing his will upon the world. Indeed, Huck evaluates his situation when he arrives on the island as follows. “But the next day I was exploring around down through the Island. I was boss of it; it all belonged to me, so to say, and I anted to know all about it; but mainly I wanted top up in the time”. (64)

After staging his own death, Huck arrives on the Island convinced he will be able to abandon civilization and refashion himself in a world of his own. By setting out, the boy intends to build a new world –one in which he will become an active agent rather than the passive participant he had been in the Widow’s “sivilized” world.

At this point, Huck believes himself to be free of all the major interpersonal conflicts that chase him throughout the novel. When the protagonist claims to be the “boss of it all”, he seems to be in control of his world, he admits that his main objective is to keep himself busy and avoid those feelings of loneliness and solitude that attack him.

The image of the “virgin land” in a New World needs no introduction in the American ideology. From Columbus to the Puritans, new world settlers have imagined a green virgin space waiting to be taken over.

Twain is well aware of this American fantasy. The notion of the “virgin land”, or New World, is well substantiated in the text of Huck Finn. From the moment that he decides to escape from the cabin in which his father had imprisoned him, Huck assumes that his own initiative will be enough to construct a world of his own. But we may agree that, despite his plans, the means that he uses to escape from captivity are part of the floating debris that belongs to the universe he is so desperate to leave behind:

“I noticed some pieces of limbs and such things floating down; and a sprinkling of bark; so I knowed the river had begun to rise. I reckoned I would have great times, now, if I was over at the town. The June rise used to be always luck for me, because as soon as the rise begins, here comes card-wood floating down, and pieces of log-rafts-sometimes a dozen logs together, so all you have to do is catch them and sell them to the woodyards and the saw mil. (53-54)

From the beginning, Huck's quest to "light out" into the new will be determined by his attachment to the old. He is, indeed, resourceful enough to "kill" his pig-like, natural "self" and escape from the grasp of Pap. He becomes unable, however, to avoid relying on the materials of the world he abandoned that seem magically to appear in the river. Far from arriving from some "virgin", untouched place, the wood and the raft are recovered and reconstructed materials of a civilization that Huck desperately seeks to leave forever. Whenever Huck succumbs to his own ambition, Twain reminds us that the "sivilization" is always ready to chase the boy into his future.

The critics with whose views our examination began treat Huck's lonesomeness as a response to the human world, or as a psychological phenomenon independent of Nature or humanity. But, however alienated Huck may be from the society that rejects him and that he rejects in turn, the mood he calls "lonesomeness" is in fact -as I have tried to show-a reaction to the natural world, perhaps at bottom to the fact of death as it manifests itself in Nature. This mood and its cause link the river passage to the other "lonesomeness" passages; Jim, we have just seen, sets it apart from them. With Jim, Huck can bask in the very mood that makes him, when alone, almost wish for death. Tom Sawyer, Aunt Sally, the Widow -almost any one of Huck's companions can cause the mood to vanish; Jim alone, however, can make it a thing of beauty, perhaps because Jim alone makes no attempt to restrict or regulate Huck, but demands of him only what he can himself offer: love.

When Huck and Jim first board the raft, they bring their cave along in the form of a "snug wigwam to get under in blazing weather and rainy" (pp. 54-55); but they no longer need it by the time the Duke and King arrive, because they now have the superior shelter of their bond. Their new companions usurp the wigwam; a fierce storm blows up; yet Nature is once again as beautiful, in its hostility, as it was on Jackson's Island. And though Huck teases us by making us momentarily fear that a "regular ripper" of a wave will do him harm, the only real danger, as he spills overboard, is that Jim will die laughing at him, or he at us (p. 104). Their safety has become, for the present, as inviolable as their love. Unfortunately love, however powerful, cannot overcome Huck's antipathy to the "sivilized" world. When Jim finally accepts a place in that world, as surely he must, Huck-as he must-refuses to follow. All we have said, however, makes Huck's decision to "light out for the

Territory" the saddest moment of the book. In lighting out Huck preserves his independence but also commits himself once more to isolation; he renews his vulnerability to Nature's malevolence, and to "lonesomeness" especially. If he is independent, he is not quite free. The need for freedom, Leo Marx has suggested, is the central theme of *Huckleberry Finn*, so we must not ignore anything that our discussion of "lonesomeness" might reveal about it.³ Marx himself believes that "freedom in this book specifically means freedom from society and its imperatives," and without entirely refusing this definition, we can now refine it considerably." For *Huckleberry Finn* presents us with at least three different kinds of freedom. Huck leaves for Jackson's Island on a quest for his kinds of freedom: freedom from restriction on the one hand and cruelty on the other, from the ways of Miss Watson and from those of pap. There he meets Jim, who is seeking a different, if related, kind of freedom, freedom from the legal institution of slavery. When men come from town to search the island, Huck's freedom is as much jeopardized as Jim's, since discovery would no doubt force Huck back into the custody of either the Widow or pap. "They're after us!" Huck shouts (p. 53), and from mutual sympathy, not an identity of ends, he and Jim join forces and begin their journey downriver.

The novel at the deepest level explores the possibility of creative independence within the confines of human society and personal freedom. Huck is caught between stern rebuke and enforced social acceptance. Caught on the horns of this dilemma, there is nevertheless a strong undercurrent of self-affirmation. Huck is filled with self-recrimination and self-condemnation, but he is never self-loathing. Huck strives for self-identity and freedom. He is a rural boy resisting civilization with extreme moral sense. He takes the highest responsibility of freeing Jim, and in the process takes risks and faces many testing situations. Huck is caught in the conflict between relieving Jim from slavery and normative behaviour expected of him by his society. Saving a slave was considered then a sin, and Huck breaks a social norm by helping Jim. He knows that it is a difficult job, but nevertheless decides to help Jim escape. There are situations in the novel where Huck wrestles with his conscience.

Huck is a classic instance of the struggle between the head and the heart. And more, he is willing to take responsibility for his actions. Huck undergoes many adventures that help

him emerge as a self-reliant and mature person without school and formal education. Huck uses his own logic and knowledge to analyse things rather than blindly following precepts. Huck's journey on the Mississippi is considered an odyssey and pilgrimage having a moral purpose. Huck takes the role of the protector to Jim and saves him in all the life threatening situations encountered on the journey down the Mississippi river. The journey is a life changing experience for Huck, leading to his emotional and personal growth with Jim as his conscience keeper. The novel is comical and adventurous, but is also a severe criticism against civilization and its traditions. From the latter point of view, Huck can be viewed as embodying the principle of anarchic rebellion.

Huck tries to find purpose and identity amidst conflicting moral positions. He initiates the journey in search of his identity and maturity. Life itself is considered a journey full of bonding and experiences which lead to wisdom and understanding. Huck spends much of his time on the Mississippi river, where he learns a lot through his experiences with different kinds of people and diverse situations. When Huck runs into the bounty hunters, he is forced to make a decision whether he must choose to help Jim or leave him. Fortunately, his will is strong and he fabricates an elaborate lie to prevent Jim from being captured. Being a rural boy, Huck seeks refuge in nature, where questions of right and wrong do not arise and what matters is life's beauty rather than societal laws. Huck is deeply rooted in the world of nature, except in the beginning of the novel. Being so, his experiences are totally dependent on nature.

Huck resists being civilized because he finds only cruelty, greed and violence in the civilized society. In fact, the conflict between civilization and natural life is considered to be one of the crucial themes of the novel. The conflict in Huck relates to the ethical question of what is right and what is wrong. Every individual has the right to know the truth and act accordingly.

Unlike Huck, Zits/Michael and Arnold/Junior refuge in a modern, urban and innovative context. Sherman Alexie's Juniors aim to become a valuable element of the American society.

Alexie has said that his work contains Indian trapdoors - "Indians fall in, white people just walk right over them" (Purdy 15). Yet he allows the possibility of reading that makes

dialogue possible or, more accurately, imagines the possibility of non-Native readers shutting up long enough to pay attention.

Although we cannot know for certain why viewers laugh when they look at the cartoons, *The Absolutely True Diary* is far more comic than Alexie's earlier autobiographical stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Partly this is the consequence of the more hopeful story that Alexie tells here; unlike the self-destructive protagonists in the author's first two novels (*Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*), Junior does not kill himself. And nor does Zits who, at the conclusion of *Flight*, establishes his return to a potentially constructive beginning in his life.

The Absolutely True Diary refuses to imagine that a novel about a contemporary Indian child could present that child is happy with his life on a reservation and its related insistence that survival requires Junior to leave the reservation. Similarly, in *Flight*, the protagonist has to abandon himself, to forget his past and to "come unstuck in time", in order to mark a new beginning and to return to a family life.

Alexie's boys only research loneliness on a temporary basis. Their solitude tends to be short-lived, while they attempt to become part of a wider society and context compared to the reservation. As for Huck, we agree that his loneliness becomes his future as he embraces freedom and potentially risk while "lighting out" for the Territory and somehow we seem not to worry about him...

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